

1405
OFFA AND ETHELBERT;

OR, THE

SAXON PRINCES,

TRAGEDY.

K
BY WILLIAM PRESTON, Esq. M.R.I.A.

DUBLIN:

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MDCCXCI.

OTTA AND FETTER

OF THE

SAXON PRINCES



T. R. A. C. E. D. F.

BY WILLIAM PRESTON, ESQ. M. A.

PUBLISHED

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GLoucester.

PERSONS OF THE DRAMA.

M E N.

OFFA, King of Mercia.

ETHELBERT, King of East Anglia.

ARDULF, Friend to Ethelbert.

SIGEBERT, Minister to Offa.

ELLA, an Officer in Offa's Army.

JUSTUS, a Religious.

EBBA, an Officer in the Army of Ethelbert.

MESSENGER.

Priests, Choristers, Guards, and Attendants.

W O M E N.

BERTHA, Wife to Offa.

ELFRIDA, Daughter to Offa.

ALWINA, } Virgins attendant on Bertha

EDBURGA, } and Elfrida.

PERSONS OF THE DRAMA.

MEN.

Orta, King of Merina.
Huttenant, King of Kaff Anglia.
Arduin, Friend to Ethelbert.
Sticeman, Minister to Orta.
Lala, an Officer in Orta's Army.
Iustus, a Religious.
Eala, an Officer in the Army of Ethelbert.
Messengers.
Knights, Choristers, Guards, and Attendants.

WOMEN.

Bertha, Wife to Orta.
Elsena, Daughter to Orta.
Alvina, } Virgins attendant on Bertha.
Larvina, } and Elvina.

A C T I.

S C E N E I.

A SEQUESTERED GROVE.

Ethelbert, Elfrida, Alwina at a small distance.

ETHELBERT.

ALL hail, beloved shades, how my soul clings
Round ev'ry plant, that this deep gloom embrowns.
Here first I breath'd the sighs of love; and here,
My sweet *Elfrida*, with an angel blush,
And downward eyes, confest her soft regards
For happy *Ethelbert*.—Ye stars of night,
Chaste moon, and thou bright messenger of dawn,
And thou great orb of day, bear witness all;
For ye have seen me tread the hallow'd ground
With pious feet, and heard my pray'rs and vows,
Bear witness to my truth.

ELFRIDA.

Yes, *Ethelbert*,
Heav'n and all nature witness to thy truth.
The gales, that whisper, waft it to mine ears;
The chearing sun imprints it on my heart,

B

In

In beams of joy and gladness. All I see,
 And all I hear, a voice and language take,
 To tell me, thou art true. Yet have I mark'd,
 (For jealous watchful are the eyes of love)
 Amidst a thousand dear and gracious proofs,
 And fond expressions of the mutual heart,
 A sudden gloom, like envious clouds, that rise
 To steal away the gladness of the morn,
 And stain with tears the florid cheek of May.
 Come, let me share thy grief.

ETHELBERT.

My best *Elfrida*,
 'Tis difficult, indeed, to hide the soul
 From love's all-seeing eye; and trust me, dearest,
 'Twere foreign to my wish, as to my pow'r,
 From thee to veil my thoughts. But wherefore mar
 The present good, or wound *Elfrida's* breast,
 With random doubt, or jealous discontent
 Which the next moment may disperse? with thee,
 I would be pleasure all. The gloomy cares
 Are vanish'd at thy smile.

ELFRIDA.

Away, you flatt'rer.
 You love me not, prince *Ethelbert*, with care
 Your heart is sick. Your tongue has now confess'd,
 What oft your looks assur'd me; yet *Elfrida*
 Is deem'd unworthy.

ETHELBERT.

Hear the truth—thy father—

ELFRIDA.

Can *Offa*, pattern of heroic worth,
 (Whose realm, whose court, whose heart are ever open
 To foster rising virtue; and whose deeds
 Are ever squar'd and levell'd, by the rule
 Of truth and honour) can he offer ought,
 To stain a royal welcome? Thou art here,
 Choice of his heart and fav'rite of his hopes,

The

The destin'd husband of his darling child.
His word is plighted.

ETHELBERT.

Thou hast touch'd the wound,
That rankles in my bosom. True, his word
Is plighted, as thou say'st; yet, why I know not,
With cruel art he dallies with my love,
And wrings with hope delay'd my sicken'd soul;
Winds up desire to madness, and wears out
The strings of life.—When I would urge my claim,
His brow is clouded with a sudden gloom;
He starts, and sighs, and in a tone severe—
“ Enough, prince *Ethelbert*, another hour
“ May suit this theme?—then calls me to the chace.

ELFRIDA.

So fully blest, in what the moment yields,
To see thee and be near thee, thine *Elfrida*
Hath sought no more; nor sent a wish beyond
The present hour, to seek for discontent,
In hope's illusive form.

ALWINA.

Princess, retire.
I hear the steps of men beneath the sycamores,
That mix'd with hazle skirt the western path,
Where royal *Offa* for the chace is wont
The chiding hounds uncouple.

ELFRIDA.

Break we off.
At dawn tomorrow, if thy steps should tread
These precincts, we may meet.

ETHELBERT.

My heart goes with thee.

[Exeunt Princess and Alwina.]

B 2

SCENE

S C E N E II.

Ethelbert. Ardulf.

ARDULF.

Will you not hunt, my lord? your royal host
 Demands your presence, and the sprightly steed
 With nostrils wide snuffs the light air, and spurns
 The sounding earth. The bowmen fit the nerve
 To the tough yew, while with an hundred tongues,
 Symphonious cry, the hounds salute the morn,
 And echo from the craggy steeps, and woods,
 And sloping lawns, and hollow glades around
 Returns th' enliv'ning challenge.

ETHELBERT.

'Tis in vain.

A lifeless weight on all my senses hangs
 And sinks my weary spirit.

ARDULF.

Let the chace,
 And feast, and minstrelsy, and love's delights
 Dispel the gloom. Forget thou art a king
 Responsible to myriads, and to heav'n,
 For delegated pow'r; and play the courtier,
 The humble courtier, at a rival's board;
 To share his pleasures, and to grace his train.

ETHELBERT.

My worthy *Ardulf*, venerable friend,
 To whom a more than filial love is due,
 For cares beyond paternal, thy reproof
 Hath pierc'd my heart; for well I know, that wisdom
 Zealous for me, and, what is dearer far
 To me than life, my glory, guides thy tongue.
 Thy guardian cares in orphan feebleness
 My childhood form'd; thy sword redeem'd my realm
 From hostile inroad; what in arts or arms
 Or manners I may boast, if ought I may,
 Are due to thee.

ARDULF.

ARDULF.

Oppress not with applause
Unmerited thy servant. What I did
Was but a subject's duty, and fell short,
Fell infinitely short, of what I ow'd
Thy royal fire, who rais'd me from the dust.
If thou wilt praise me, let thy noble acts
Do justice to my precepts; that the world,
Applauding thee, may say, great *Ethelbert*
Perform'd in manhood, what he learn'd in youth,
From faithful *Ardulf*.

ETHELBERT.

Think not, good old man,
Thy lessons wasted; well I know the ties,
That bind me to my people. Well I know
I live not for myself. I pant for fame,
And seek it only in a nation's welfare.
Yet *Ardulf*, let thy soul, (howe'er mature
In years and wisdom) to the days of youth
Revert, and somewhat sure thou wilt indulge
To heat of passion, which has ever seisd
The best and noblest minds.

ARDULF.

Alas! my lord,
Nor danger to the state, so long bereft
Of royal cares, I mourn, nor for thy fame,
Tho' dear as life; but my presaging soul
Sinks, to behold thee thus within the grasp
Of Mercia's pow'r, whose kings, from sire to son,
Are *Anglia's* scourge and terror.

ETHELBERT.

Noble minds
Will shrink abhorrent from the traitor's arts.—
Would *Offa*, think'st thou, stain his royal robes
With blood of him, who on a monarch's faith
Bides at his court? are not our mutual vows
Of friendship plighted? have not solemn oaths
Combin'd

Combin'd our kingdoms, long to wars a prey,
 In league of holy peace? and by the bond
 Of dear connexion to secure these ties,
 Hath he not giv'n to happy *Ethelbert*
 The daughter of his hopes?

ARDULF.

But why delay,
 With studied art, your nuptials? why consume
 In frivolous delights the lavish'd hours
 Which *Offa* well could husband, were he not,
 Rough as he seems, intent, by policy,
 To snare thy noble nature, and relax
 With pleasure's honey'd bane thy youthful mind?

ETHELBERT.

Could *Offa* be thus treach'rous?

ARDULF.

Doubt it not;
 Thy potent voice, from *Arwan's* fertile banks,
 From stormy Humber, and the sea-beat shore,
 Might call the hardy bands, and pour them forth,
 To visit on the Mercian plains the waste
 That *Penda's* fury spread. He views thee, prince,
 As shepherds view the royal lion's whelp,
 A .l in his paws yet soft, and infant fangs
 Anticipate the ravage of the fold.
 Hence, with the nets of beauty, with the cords
 Of strong desire, the silken toils of love
 He seeks to snare thy feet, to wrap thee round,
 And drag thee, to the pit.

Sound of hunters horns is heard at a distance.

Enter Bertha and Edburga.

BERTHA.

Hear you not, prince,
 How you are summon'd? with the merry horn,
Offa reproaches your delay. The stag
 Is now unharbour'd.

ETHELBERT,

ETHELBERT, [*aside to Ardulf.*]

At a future hour,
We will pursue this theme ; for trust me, *Ardulf*,
The dark surmises of my secret thought
Too well accord, with what thy love has urg'd,
And prudent caution ; [*to Bertha*] were we longer
absent

Offa would chide our sloth, else beauteous *Bertha*,
I would not fly thee.

BERTHA.

Hasten to the chace ;
And joy and pleasure go with *Ethelbert*.
(*Exeunt Ethelbert. Ardulf.*)

S C E N E III.

Bertha and Edburga.

BERTHA.

The horn awakes the chace, and warlike *Offa*
Leads forth to sportive fields the gallant youth
Whom oft he led to combat. War has sheath'd
His cruel sword ; and now the piercing cries
Of wretched dames, for sons or husbands torn
From their embrace are hush'd. The realm is calm,
And all things in it, save the tortur'd breast
Of *Bertha* ; there conflicting passions wage
Eternal warfare. Tell me, my *Edburga*,
You saw the pageant pass, what youths with *Offa*
Pursue the stag ? yet wherefore should I ask ?
Young *Ethelbert* is there ; when he is present
All other objects fade ; all eyes and tongues
And spirits dwell on him, and him alone.
Thy looks, *Edburga*, speak a lively feeling,
Thy words an apt and pregnant understanding ;
What is thy judgment (*speak without disguise*)
Of princely *Ethelbert* ?

EDBURGA.

My gracious mistress,
It ill beseems a poor and lowly maiden,

Whose

Whose thoughts should be all humble as her birth,
 To gaze on high, and with presumptuous glance
 Appreciate the merit of a king ;
 Yet will I own, since you demand my thought,
 Were I a princess, or the king of *Anglia*
 An humble peasant swain, I were most happy.

BERTHA.

Had I been born a peasant girl, no laws
 Had frown'd stern interdict on love. Ah wretch,
 And traitress to thyself!—what guilty thoughts
 My bosom harbours, and my rebel tongue
 Would fain avow.—*Edburga*, wonder not,
 To hear my lavish praise of *Ethelbert*.
 Think not I love him ; heav'n forefend, that love
 Should teach a matron, from her plighted lord
 To wander, ev'n in wish. No, *Bertha's* soul
 Impassive to the gust of vain desire
 Retains her wedded vows. May quick destruction
 Gape to devour me, ere I stain the faith
 To royal *Offa* giv'n ; but gratitude—

EDBURGA.

I've heard that gallant *Ethelbert* preserv'd
 Your sacred life.

BERTHA.

And truly hast thou heard.—
 One morn ; O still to cruel memory
 That morn is present, *Offa* chac'd the stag.
 King *Ethelbert* was there ; I join'd the band.
 At *Offa's* side I rode, and talk'd with *Ethelbert* ;
 Sweet flow'd his honey'd accents, and discourse
 Beguil'd the moments, ere our sport began.—
 'Twas where yon river thro' th' impending woods
 Winds it's uncertain way. Thou seest the tuft
 Of guarled oaks, that, sloping from the rock
 Peer into the deep gulph, and overhang
 The black'ning eddy.

EDBURGA.

EDBURGA.

There the bank abrupt
Seems shatter'd, by a rude convulsive shock
Of startling nature.

BERTHA.

Then, a narrow path
Skirted the river's verge.—There past the stag;
The hounds pursued.—I prest my foaming steed,
Fir'd with a youthful ardour, which perhaps
My sex ill-suited, to the dang'rous pass.
The treach'rous foil gave way, and down I sunk.

EDBURGA.

Alas ! for pity—by what saving pow'r?—

BERTHA.

Thrice I emerg'd ; thrice o'er my fated head
Roar'd the devouring deep. Then, *Ethelbert*,
His danger at the sight of mine forgotten, plung'd
Into th' abyss ; the fourth time, as I rose,
His left hand seis'd my tresses, with his right
He stem'd the flood, and bore me to the land.—
Oh better I had perish'd !

EDBURGA.

Gracious heav'n !

Who then is happy ? Sure, the circling hours
Waft blessings to thee, on their golden plumes ;
And hover round thy head, with fond delay,
To pour down treasur'd joys. The mighty heart
Of Mercia's king, wise, brave, munificent
As teeming autumn, beats for thee alone,
Preventing all thy wishes.

BERTHA.

Yet, *Edburga*,

There's not a wretch, that crawls this burthen'd earth,
A slave, whose tears bedew the land he tills,
From an harsh lord to gain the bitter morsel,
That lengthens out his course of pain and bondage,
Would change estates with me, could they but read,
The

The secrets of my heart ;—some monstrous doom,
Awaits me sure ;—would I had ne'er been born !—

EDBURGA.

For heav'n's dear sake, recall your wand'ring
thoughts,

Your eyes are bent on vacancy, a wildness
A fearful wildness o'er your visage reigns—

BERTHA.

Would I had lain expos'd amidst the wild,
In helpless infancy ; or on the beach
Dash'd with the toiling surge, a mangled corse,
Or vulturs to their aery, welcome banquet
Borne me to feast their young.

EDBURGA.

Restrain yourself.

Alas ! we are discover'd ; hasty steps
Sound o'er that winding path, and now mine eye,
Thro' the scant op'ning of the beechen grove,
Perceives a man approach, 'tis *Ethelbert*.

BERTHA.

So soon return'd !—But I divine the cause.—
The lov'd *Elfrida*.—Leave me, good *Edburga*—
Our royal guest may seek for private converse,
On points that much import him ; and thy presence
Were a restraint. Thou know'st the little grotto,
Beside the bank of violets, and the willows
That bathe their golden tresses in the stream,
Where *Emma*, victim of disastrous love,
Plung'd desp'rate in the flood ; there, wait my coming.

[Exit *Edburga*.]

S C E N E IV,

Ethelbert and Bertha.

BERTHA. [*aside.*]

O guilty love, in form of gratitude,
How hast thou crept ! I nurs'd thee in my bosom

Thou

Thou serpent, pleas'd to see thy spiry volumes
 Of verdant gold ; but soon thy fatal sting
 Destroy'd my peace ; thy venom fill'd my heart,
 —Erewhile the chace for *Ethelbert* had charms ;
 And oft detain'd him, till the sun, repos'd
 On crimson beds behind the hills, had warn'd
 To feast and minstrelsy.—This day my lord
 Appointed for the field, from early dawn,
 Till vesper bell should call the holy beadmen
 To chaunt their orisons.

ETHELBERT.

Along the hills
 That lift their green shorn ridges o'er these woods,
 Your lord pursues the stag, with such an ardour,
 As marks our first enjoyments. He is happy,
 Victorious, prosp'rous ; his wishes crown'd
 By heav'n with lavish hand. The man, whose hopes
 Hang all in jeopardy, but ill conforms
 With pleasure's jocund sons ; the chace to him
 Is dull and tiresome, and the banquet palls.

BERTHA.

Had I the pow'r of Providence, at will
 To lavish blessings ; *Ethelbert* were happy.
 Oh never shall my grateful heart forego
 The gallant deed that call'd me back to life.
 'Tis ev'n oppressive to my soul, that feels
 How poor I am in thanks, how void of means,
 To pay the mighty debt of gratitude.

ETHELBERT.

Thanks were reproaches, lady ; I should scorn
 My nature, could I look for recompense.—
 A voice within this breast had bade me venture,
 Ev'n as I did for thee, to save from death
 The poorest peasant ; yet the means are thine
 Would overpay ten thousand fold.

BERTHA.

Oh ! speak.
 That eager gratitude may fly to serve thee.—

Like

Like guardian spirits would I wait thy call;
All eye, all ear, all quick intelligence,
To see, to hear, and execute thy will.

ETHELBERT.

More than my tutelary saint or angel,
This hour thou could'st befriend me.

BERTHA.

Say, what boon
Can *Ethelbert* demand, and I withhold?

ETHELBERT.

A truant to the cares of royalty,
And all the duties, that my faithful subjects
May justly claim, I linger here, the slave
Of am'rous hope, and trembling expectation.—
—Why these averted looks? eyes bent on earth?
Why heaves thy breast?

BERTHA.

'Twas but a transient pang
Shot thro' my bosom. I am often thus.

ETHELBERT.

I know thou can'st, with softly potent sway,
Demanding nought, yet all obtaining, bend
Stern as it is the mind of royal *Offa*;
And were thine influence employ'd, at hours
Of kind compliance, when the expanded heart
Ev'n to its sanctuary access yields,
To urge the claims, that from my realm an alien
Have bade me count twice ten revolving moons,
A sojourner with *Offa*; then *Elfrida*,
Already mine, by *Mercia's* plighted faith,
Were mine by nuptial rites. No more her fire,
Whose eyes are still unsatisfied with gazing
On her fresh opening beauties, would withhold her
From my warm prayers.

BERTHA.

He ever will withhold;
And ever shall; if *Bertha's* cries and tears,

And

And bended knees have pow'r. Was it for this?
 —Oh I am mad.—To pander for your love—
 To mediate nuptial leagues, and send the daughter
 Of warlike *Offa*, whose victorious name
 Bears terror thro' this isle, from wealthy *Mercia*,
 The proudest of our Saxon states, to share
 Within thine humble *Anglia's* narrow bounds,
 And little court, a queen in miniature,
 Thy mimic grandeur?

ETHELBERT.
 Heav'ns! what sin of mine

Hath rous'd thine hatred?—

BERTHA.

Sayst thou, *Ethelbert*—
 My hatred?—hate thee,—could'st thou read my heart?
 Oh could its thoughts and feelings with the current
 Of vital blood reveal'd and sensible
 Before thee flow, this hand should aim the ponyard,
 And warm expression gush in purple tides.

ETHELBERT.

If ever *Ethelbert* in *Bertha's* eyes,
 By wish, or word, or fond observant act,
 Hath favour found; if e'er that gentle heart,
 (As sure it has) confest the pow'r of love;
 Learn from thyself to feel for *Ethelbert*.

BERTHA.

The pow'r of love!—to feel for *Ethelbert*!—
 Feel what?—perdition—whither am I driv'n?
 One step—and I am hurry'd down the abyfs.
 Feel—feel—I feel too much.—O *Ethelbert*,
 Farewell, farewell.

ETHELBERT.

O fly me not in anger.
 O stay, and bless me. Tell me, that *Elfrida*,
 The guerdon of my long and faithful love!
 The wish, the promis'd blessing of my life,
 Shall yet be mine.

BERTHA.

BERTHA.

—No—fooner let destruction
Come sweeping on us all. *Elfrida* thine!—
Oh never, never.—Hence; avoid my sight;
Thy looks are poison to me.

ETHELBERT.

—Gracious heav'n!
I stand confounded.—I conjure thee, speak.
What means this storm of passion? Why shrink back,
As from some hateful and accursed thing,
That threatens life?

BERTHA.

And wherefore art thou good,
Wife, brave, and gentle? Why art thou adorn'd
With ev'ry grace, to win the coldest heart?
These are thy sins. Heavy, indeed, they are.
They have destroy'd my peace.

ETHELBERT.

Destroy'd thy peace?
What fatal myst'ry lurks beneath thy speech?
I view thee, with such reverential awe,
As suits a parent's wife.

BERTHA.

Cold-blooded prince!
A parent's wife—and reverential awe—
Can rev'rence suit with love?—a love like mine.

ETHELBERT.

Like thine!—for whom? thy strange mysterious
words
Fill me with doubt and wonder.

BERTHA.

May'st thou doubt,
And wonder ever. May the shades of night
Conceal it. Never may the tell-tale breeze
Whisper it in the desert. From myself
I fain would hide it. But thro' shade and silence,
To me too palpable, it glares, it sounds

For

For ever ever present. In the grave,
 When earth shall cover me, with *Bertha* rest,
 Thou nameless monster of abortive thought,
 [Here, in her agitation, she drops the picture of
Ethelbert from her bosom; he takes it up. She
 shrieks and endeavours to wrest it from him.]

ETHELBERT.

Ha! what is here?—my form and lineaments
 Find place in *Bertha*'s bosom.

BERTHA.

'Tis betray'd—
 The guilty secret.—To dissemble now
 Were unavailing. Hear then, *Ethelbert*,
 A secret story, which I thought no pow'r of fortune
 Keen harrowing up my flesh, had ever taught
 This tongue to utter, that the heart of *Bertha*
 More than the light, and air, and hopes of heav'n
 Loves thee. Thou art it's spring, it's vital heat.—
 On ev'ry pow'r and function of my soul
 The wasting flame has prey'd; nine weary moons
 Have view'd my shame and sorrows.

ETHELBERT.

Do I awake?
 Can *Merçia*'s queen, the pride of *Saxon* dames—
 —Sure, some illusive demon mocks my sense,
 With sounds dissembled.

BERTHA.

Hear me, king of *Anglia*;
 —The bonds are rent, that fetter'd my resolves,
 Reserve, and fear, and female decency.—
 Where shall the spirit stay, that once hath dar'd
 An outrage on our sex's pride, a shipwreck
 Of all we dearly prize; a bold avowal
 Of love illicit?—By those scalding tears,
 That flow, like molten lead, and scorch me up,
 I would not hurt thee; but my furious soul
 Stung with despair, and scorn, and self-reproach,

May

May commune with the fiends, and call them round,
To bathe in blood, and lay a scene of horror
That both our realms shall mourn to latest time.

End of the first Act.

A C T II.

SCENE I.

An apartment in the Palace of Offa.

BERTHA *alone.*

Wretch that I am ! ensnar'd in passion's toil ;
Desires illicit winding round my heart,
Up-rear their dragon crests ; hiss in mine ears ;
And sting my soul to death. Remorse and shame
Cling to me, like a vestment dipt in venom,
Consume my flesh, thrill anguish thro' my frame,
And taint the vital flood. Ye saints of grace,
Angels of mercy, lend me force to break
The dire enchantment.—*Ethelbert.*—*Elfrida.*—
It may not be.—Those names together sounded
Are an accursed spell, that conjures up
The blackest forms of mischief. Never, never
By name, or hand, or nuptial rite, *Elfrida*
With *Ethelbert* shall join. That fatal hour
Heav'n witness to my vow, for *Bertha* dead
Leads forth the fun'ral pomp. But how avert
The blow ? those arts, which long delay'd it, fail
Fond of his daughter as he is, and bound
By ties of plighted faith, my lord must yield.
Ha !—to my wish this crafty states-man comes
Most opportune.—O welcome *Sigebert.*

SCENE

S C E N E II.

BERTHA AND SIGEBERT. *She speaks.*

Not less thy years mature in sage experience
Advance our *Mercian* weal, by peaceful arts,
Than conqu'ring *Offa* by the blood-stain'd sword.

SIGEBERT.

My royal mistress, ill this partial praise
Suits a despis'd old man. There was a time,
When *Offa* yet was new to cares of state
And found his sceptre heavy; then, the voice
Of *Sigebert* had pow'r. 'Tis feeble now,
'Midst noise of youthful spirits, who confiding
In what alone they understand, the sword,
Would send the man of peace, with droning monks,
O'er books and beads to wear his life in cloisters.
Yet haply 'twere not ill for *Mercia's* peace,
Might this poor voice be heard.

BERTHA.

In dear rememb'rance
Of grateful thought, my lord retains the time,
When, by thine influence led, th' assembled chiefs
Of *Mercia's* wide dominion hail'd him king,
As yet a youth; ere his victorious arm
Tore from th' usurper's brow, the diadem.
Yet now, the sov'reign of a rival state,
A jealous spy, and antient enemy,
Can bias him, with more prevailing sway,
Than those, who form'd and led his early years,
Thro' paths of glory to this height of pow'r.

SIGEBERT.

That smooth and beardless king, with flowing hair,
And glozing speeches comely as his form,
Hath won his heart.—Why, he will sit all night,
To hear him touch the harp, and sing soft songs
Of love and dalliance. He, that had no joy,

C

Save

Save in the thought of war, and godlike dreams
Of added empire, wears day after day
In chace and frivolous delights, to please
His guest ; as tho' he would become, like him,
A stripling monarch.

BERTHA.

Say, good *Sigebert*,
How deems thy wisdom of the nuptial league
So soon to be complete ?

SIGEBERT.

As of an act
That, with a spend-thrift wantonness, repels
Good fortune from our doors. The present hour
Offers, what never shall a future bring,
To *Mercia* wealth, pow'r, and security.
Ev'n now to *Humber*, and the northern main,
Might *Offa* stretch his sceptre.

BERTHA.

Well and justly
Hast thou conceiv'd, what *Mercia's* weal demands.
Shall *Offa*, greatest monarch of this isle,
Bestow the darling of his hopes and cares
On the poor sov'reign of a petty state,
Which only holds a kingdom's sounding name,
By his forbearance ?

SIGEBERT.

Why should *Anglia* lean,
On *Mercia*, as a prop, when wiser counsels
Might turn her weakness to our strength ? subjected
To *Mercia*, she would yield, not crave support ;
And prove best feather in her eagle wing
For conquest imp'd.—Why feed the hungry soil
Of *Anglia* with our fatness ? and engraft
On the firm trunk of the majestick oak
That shades the plain, and yields to beast and trav'ler
Shelter and food ; an unproductive bramble ?

BERTHA.

BERTHA.

'Tis yours alone from such disgrace to save
Your native land. And should your happy arts
And influence o'er the king avert the blow—
What praise, good *Sigebert*, were yours?

SIGEBERT.

The talk, the praise be thine; for who, like thee,
Can *Offa's* spirit temper?—since the day
Thy dazzling beauties from the gloomy thought
Of *Emma* dead, and stern ambition's care,
Recall'd him first to tread the flow'ry paths
Of love and pleasure.—Genius of his soul
Enthron'd supreme; thy hand can minister
It's elements and seasons; bid them swell
To vex the land with storm, or sooth them down,
In melting calm, and fost'ring influence.

BERTHA.

True, I may something boast;—yet, far too highly
You rate my pow'r; for with contending sway,
My rival in his heart, *Elfrida's* craft
Will with insidious tears th' impressions mar
That I have labour'd. Thus, with silent lapse,
The stealing waters from the flinty rock
Erase the graver's toil.

SIGEBERT.

Oh doubt not thou
My zealous efforts; and if I retain
Pow'r with my lord, the next autumnal sun
That shine on *Anglia* shall embrown her harvests
For *Offa*, and their reapers hail him king.

BERTHA.

Behold, my lord approaches.—On his brow
Care is imprinted, and his whole demeanour
Marks the fierce conflict of alternate passions
That rend the wav'ring mind. I will retire.
But thou the subject of our present converse
Urge home with timely suit, and heav'n to speed.

[Exit *Bertha*.]

S C E N E III.

*Offa and Sigebert.*OFFA. [*aside.*]

Delusive phantom of o'erweening pow'r,
 What art thou? Can'st thou fill the boundless wish?
 —I feel thou can'st not; for each new possession
 Serves but to goad me, with increase of appetite,
 To seek extended empire. What is fame?
 What is this unseen blessing which bids kings
 Defile their hands with blood, and wear their days
 In care and tumult? 'Tis the giddy shout
 Of worthless multitudes, or venal song
 Of minstrel chanted at the revel board.
 What is the wish, which my recoiling mind
 Scarce to herself confides, which like a viper
 Half peering from it's dark retreat starts back,
 As of the gaze impatient? night by night,
 With thoughts envenom'd my repose to sting,
 It lurks beneath my pillow. Th' hour is come.
 I must decide, for with a lover's ardour,
 Which may not be delay'd, young *Ethelbert*
 Demands completion of our royal word.—
 —Shall I then stain with guiltless blood the laurels
 So dearly purchas'd? and forego the praise,
 From virtuous deeds redounding, which survives
 In good mens hearts, and like the precious incense
 On God's high altar laid, ascends to heav'n?

Seeing SIGEBERT.

Oh save me, *Sigebert*; thou com'st in time,
 To save me from myself. Ne'er did my soul
 So need thy counsels.

SIGEBERT.

Wherefore should I speak?
 Alas, my lord, there was a time, when *Sigebert*
 Might speak, with confidence; but well he knows
 That age which weighs his body to the dust

Hath

Hath humbled his repute ; and should his counsel
 Be now requir'd, 'tis but to sooth his pride,
 An old man's pride, in gratitude perhaps
 For service past.

OFFA.

In proof how much I prize
 Thy counsels, hear, what pride would fain conceal ;
 Thy master's mind, which never, with design,
 From virtue swerv'd before, now fluctuates
 'Twixt good and ill, and entertains a doubt
 If faith should bind a monarch.

SIGEBERT.

And a king
 May sometimes justly entertain a doubt
 If faith should bind him, when the strict observance
 Would contravene the welfare of his state.

OFFA,

Have I then publish'd laws, and taught my subjects
 To know and venerate the sacred bounds,
 Of right and wrong, and led the fiery spirits
 Nurs'd in the camp and train'd in acts of outrage,
 To cherish decent order, and perform
 The offices from man to his brother due?
 And shall I be the first to break the ties
 I have myself ordain'd, and stand th' example
 Of wolfish violence or serpent fraud ?

SIGEBERT.

As in his station from the private subject
 The monarch differs ; he must likewise vary
 His rules of life. His virtues and his wisdom
 Are diff'rent far, from what the names import
 In meaner men, since he for others lives,
 Not for himself, and what in private life
 Were heinous crime, in sov'reigns may become,
 Sanction'd by public weal, a virtuous deed.
 I speak with boldness, since my gracious lord
 Gives scope and license to his servant's tongue.

Would

Would you the rankling thorn, which fair occasion
Bids pluck from *Mercia's* side, implant for ever
Bane of her peace and safety ?

OFFA.

Sigebert,

Thy voice hath rous'd a thought, which I had talk'd
My force to smother. To the shores of ocean
Anglia posselt would stretch the bounds of *Mercia*.
But *Ethelbert* is valiant, brave, and wise,
And never, but with life will he resign
His lineal sceptre. In my dreams ambition,
A giant spectre clad in panoply,
Stands at my couch, and with his brandish'd spear
Dazzles my sight. His mouth a subtle flame
Exhales, that fills my bosom. To my hand
Methinks he gives a chalice ; with the blood
Of *Ethelbert* tis fill'd ; he bids me quaff it ;
Then shrieks, in sounds, which on my waking ear
Vibrate, " remember he is in thy pow'r."

SIGEBERT.

The public mind from *Offa's* fame demands
A race of glory. Well hast thou begun ;
But much remains ;—beneath one common head,
'To join the *Saxon* pow'rs, discordant parts
Each weak'ning other of one feeble mass.
In lasting sleep the sword shall rest ; and peace
Cloath all our hills with verdure ; and our ships
Shall cross the deep, to seek on distant shores
New arts and comforts. Late posterity
Shall say—'twas *Offa* made the sons of *England*
Renown'd and happy.

OFFA.

Vainly, shall my cares

Wake for the peace of *Mercia*, while from *Anglia*,
With northern pirates leagu'd, the hungry borderers
Pour like a deluge on our fertile plains.
In vain, my pow'r hath to his mountain holds

Repell'd

Repell'd the *Cambrian* as his native stream
 Fierce and impetuous. In vain, my rampart
 Rears his majestic length, to curb the foe,
 From the wide outlet of the winding *Dee*,
 To where the *Wey*, with sounding torrent, joins
 The *Severn's* mighty march.

SIGEBERT.

Those aged knees
 I bend, which never bow'd before to man.
 Not for myself I pray (my sand of life
 Hath little space to run, and only seeks
 Leisure and grace, to call my sins of youth,
 To solemn audit,) for thy future fame,
 And for thy subjects, and their childrens children,
 For whom the present hour to latest time
 May peace and wealth secure, with supplications
 Humble, as men should to the deity
 Prefer, I kneel.

OFFA.

Arise ; for good or ill
 Thy voice decides the conflict, Call *Elfrida*,
 [Exit *Sigebert*.]

I must possess my daughter of our purpose.
 Her young affections are on *Ethelbert*
 So fix'd and rivetted, that it will need
 A parent's whole authority, combin'd
 With softest blandishment and fond persuasion
 To mold her will obedient to my wish.

S C E N E IV.

To him Sigebert returns with Elfrida.

ELFRIDA.

I learn from venerable *Sigebert*
 My father seeks my presence ; and have halted
 To know his honour'd will.

OFFA.

OFFA.

Attend, my child.
 Thou still hast been obedient to my wish,
 And, well thou know'st, with fond solicitude
 I have prevented thine. The hour is come,
 (If an indulgent father's tenderness
 May challenge a return,) to show thy mind
 Nor heedless, nor ungrateful to his love.

ELFRIDA.

Why should my father thus, with circumstance,
 And hint imperfect, half reveal his will,
 And half withhold ; as doubtful of my duty ?
 Heav'n knows this heart, my daily orisons
 Have been, in thought, and deed, to please my father.

OFFA.

Well, I will prove thee then. Canst thou resign
 The wish most inward to thy heart, which hope
 Hath, like a child, it's mother's pride and toy,
 Nourish'd with amorous thoughts, and images
 Of fond delight ? I know the sacrifice
 Most painful ; well I see th' impassion'd storm.
 'Tis, as I should command thee pierce thy heart ;
 Or tear the precious apple from an eye.
 But what were duty ? what, in sight of heav'n,
 The palm of virtue, were it's practice easy ?
 You start and tremble.

ELFRIDA.

Oh ! my dearest father.

You taught me first to look on *Ethelbert*,
 As on my future lord. My heart is his
 More than my own ; but 'twas my father's boon
 Not mine ; and now, it may not be recall'd.
 Part of my being, with my heart strings 'twin'd
 Is the strong tie, that binds me to his fate.
 Like a young plant, my love for *Anglia's* king
 Hath grown beneath your hand ; you saw it rise.
 And daily water'd it, with lavish praise

Of

Of his endowments. Would you root it up,
And cast it forth, now, in the blooming promise
Of fair and golden fruit? this fatal change
Your words import.

OFFA.

Now answer me, *Elfrida*,
Meet were it, that the father to the child
Should render strict account, of all the motives,
That actuate his will? Suffice to say;
Dear as my life I prize thy happiness.
But reasons cogent founded in the weal
Of *Mercia's* state, and prudent policy,
Demand this sacrifice,

SIGEBERT.

Yes, beauteous maid,
Most nearly it concerns the good of myriads
Present and future, that the highborn daughter
Of *Mercia* should reject the proffer'd nuptials
Of *Anglia's* monarch. Maidens, in their songs
Thy praises shall rehearse; and learn'd historians,
Amongst illustrious dames that sav'd their country,
Record *Elfrida*.

ELFRIDA.

Why is this? What monster
For light too hideous lurks in mystery?
Why am I thus beset? upon my knees,
O lov'd, rever'd, dear author of my being,
To thee I fall. Behold my streaming tears;
Spurn me not from thee; by the faintest shade
Of my departed mother. By the charge
Giv'n with her last embraces, when she join'd
Our hands in hers, then, cold and damp with death,
And said—"Be kind to this, the first-born pledge
"Of our chaste loves."—If e'er my natal hour
With joy suffus'd thy cheek; or on thy heart
Paternal transport rush'd, as from the fight
Return'd and red with wounds, to thee I ran,

And

And clung around thy knees all cas'd in mail.
 Then in thine arms tir'd from the work of death,
 Stooping you caught me, and in tender passion
 Strain'd to your bosom, whence the blood of foes,
 Flow'd undistinguish'd from your own, and painted
 With crimson streaks your cuirass.

OFFA.

Rise, my daughter,
 I cannot hear thee plead, and may not grant
 Remission of my purpose ; well thou know'st
 Thy sorrows rend my heart ; yet were I weak,
 And all unworthy of the crown I wear,
 Should ev'n my tenderness to thee, whose grief,
 I would most gladly with my own redeem,
 Retard me from pursuit of *Mercia's* weal.

ELFRIDA.

Ere yet I rise, O hear all righteous heav'n,
 The solemn vow breath'd from a virgin's lips,
 Which in due orison, both ev'n and morn,
 Have fought the throne of grace ; if I must yield
 My lord betroth'd, the husband of my choice,
 To that authority, which never yet
 I dar'd to question ; then, the spouse of God,
 From this delusive world will I retire
 A cloister'd votary, and in humble weeds
 To bid my beads, and chaunt the solemn rites,
 And pray, that thou, and *Ethelbert* may live
 Prosp'rous and happy ; or a requiem sing
 To souls of slaughter'd wretches, who have fal'n
 In fields embattled, victims of the pride,
 And avarice of kings. These little charms
 Fasting and vigils shall consume, these robes
 And tinsel ornaments to sackcloth change.

OFFA.

Oh rise my daughter. Sure, a spirit of heav'n
 Speaks thro' thine organs, for mine alter'd soul
 Now loaths, as sinful, what it late pursued

As

As wise and laudable ; ye pow'rs of grace
 Be ever blest, that in due time recall'd
 My wandering feet, ere yet the fatal meshes
 Of error's net had snar'd them past redemption.

SIGEBERT.

What then is man ! and what are his resolves ?
 A feather tost by ev'ry vagrant gales.
 Thus fades the air-built pile of *Mercia's* greatness,
 Puff'd into nothing, by a puling maiden,
 With a few love sick sighs.—What I had labour'd
 For years, to raise. Yet will I not despair ;
 Ambition has relax'd, not yielded whole ;
 Her powers on *Offa's* mind ; I will essay him,
 And find occasion apt—when glorious pride
 And prudence shall in reason's balance weigh,
 A kingdom's value, with a woman's tear.

[Exit Sigebert.]

S C E N E V.

Offa, Ethelbert, and Elfrida.

OFFA.

Oh king of *Anglia*, timely art thou come.
 Here, gallant *Ethelbert*, receive my daughter,
 A present worthy of a king to give
 And king to take. Reach me thy hand, *Elfrida*.
 Long hath this plighted hand been thine, by promise.
 Now 'tis thine own, indeed.—May bounteous heav'n
 With blessings crown your union.—As the bond
 Of marriage makes you one, so may the ties
 Of holy peace and nuptial amity
 Unite our kingdoms to the latest time.

ETHELBERT.

My bosom labours, with it's mighty freight
 Of wild tumultuous joy. A blisful faintness
 Shuts up my senses, stops my failing breath,
 Dazzles my sight, and tingles in mine ears.—

Elfrida

Elfrida mine! hear it thou ambient air,
 And waft it to the skies; that cherubim
 May catch the sound, and join in choral warblings,
Elfrida mine! behold it, ye chaste stars,
 And shed your happiest influence; urge your spheres,
 With swifter pace to roll their cycles on,
 And bring the blissful hour. My gratitude,
 For speech too mighty, shall be shown in deeds.

ELFRIDA.

If, *Ethelbert*, my tongue, by secret fear,
 And maiden shame restrain'd, hath hitherto
 Been silent; deem not thence *Elfrida's* love
 Less warm, or transport at this blest event.—
 My lord, my father; now, thou hast, indeed,
 Approv'd thyself a father, gentle, kind,
 As thou wert ever; and a second time
 Being on me confer'd; for while I live
 This frail existence hangs on *Ethelbert*.

OFFA.

What transport fills my bosom! full contentment,
 How sweet thy smiles, thou child of rectitude.
 As to her handmaid elm the wedded vine
 Clings and unites, may thou to *Ethelbert*!
 The pious *Egbert*, who from *Litchfield* sways
 With hallow'd crozier *Mercia's* church, tomorrow
 With pray'rs devout and tuneful psalmody
 Of nuptial hymn shall bless your mutual vows.

[Exeunt.

End of the second Act.

ACT

A C T III.

S C E N E I.

A magnificent chapel of antique structure adorned
as for a marriage ceremony—*Ethelbert* and *El-
frida* with their attendants, priests, and choristers.
—A nuptial song is performed.

NUPTIAL SONG.

I.

*Come smiling peace, and piety, and truth
For ever blooming in eternal youth.
Awhile forsake your lov'd abode ;
Whether, from hermit's cell,
With pray'r,
Your sister bright and fair,
In tuneful hymns ye seek the throne of God ;
Or not less pure,
From giant crimes secure,
The fields, and homestead of the happy swain,
The grove, and sloping mead,
With paths delighted softly tread ;
Soon ye sweet strangers come, and long remain ;
And deign with kings in courtly bow'rs to dwell,*

II.

*To bless the rites, oh come ye hallow'd band ;
And on this gentle pair, with bounteous hand,
Your bright and sacred treasures pour
Richer than orient gold,
Or gems,
Or royal diadems,
The virtuous thought, and self-applauding hour,
Compleat and whole
According unison of soul.*

Let

*Let waving plenty crown their peasant's toil.
 Oh banish from their age
 Famine, and fear, and hostile rage.
 Let heav'n with eyes benign regard the soil,
 And bid their children's sons the sceptre hold.*

After the nuptial song performed, *Offa* enters in great agitation with *Sigebert*.

OFFA, *aside*.

Oh beauteous scene of peace ; ambition down ;
 Why wilt thou warp my spirit ? let me tread
 The blessed paths of virtue, and partake
 These children's happiness. Oh then relent.—
 Wilt thou with impious hands, thou savage man,
 Rend the predestin'd ties, which heav'n has knit ?
 Wilt thou o'er this fair prospect, like a fiend
 Sail wrapt in storm, and blight, and pestilence ?
 To mar it all, and turn the notes of joy,
 Which cherubim might share, to groans of anguish.
 —Oh *Sigebert*, Oh *Bertha*, your suggestions
 Have sunk too deep. Resistless influence
 The pow'rs malign predominate. In vain
 My heart recoils. What fate decrees must come.
 [He advances from the side scene to the front
 of the Stage.]

Break off the rites, reserve the nuptial vow,
 For happier hour, and omens. Now, the stars
 With aspect red frown on our work. *Elfrida*,
 Retire. You marvel, prince, but know that causes
 Most urgent, and such high authority
 As I may not gainsay, demand this change.

ETHELBERT.

Is this then *Offa's* faith ?—know, king of *Mercia*,
 In fight of heav'n I hold *Elfrida* mine ;
 And never, but with life, will I resign
 The dear possession. No, this little arm
 In such a cause will hurl the thunder's force
 Against

Against opposing breasts, and guard my claim,
 Tho' thousands stood array'd, in phalanx firm,
 Thy creatures. Think not, tho' thy realm outweighs
 In strength my *Anglia*, this most cruel wrong
 Shall unreveng'd be borne. Rage will supply
 What fails in force.

OFFA.

Young prince, you talk this well.
 But ne'er shall threats, when other motives fail,
 The soul of *Offa* sway.—Restrain thy rage.
 A future moment, haply, may concede
 What from thy wish the present hour withholds.

ELFRIDA.

Oh wretched princess! from what height of hap-
 piness
 Art thou cast down? My woes like famish'd wolves
 Wait to devour me. O my lord, my husband.—
 —My father!—shall these dear and tender names,
 Which I so fondly cherish'd, prove but titles
 Of sorrow and despair? and shall the ties
 Which seem'd by hand of angels wove, to draw
 Me kindly to you both, prove racking cords
 To strain my heart asunder? nature, nature,
 Duty, and love, oh whom shall I renounce?
 Whom follow? ev'ry way, oh most undone.—
 Can I renounce thee, *Ethelbert*, whose love
 I tender more than life? and O my father,
 Can I begin to stand in bold rebellion
 Against that will I ne'er oppos'd before?

OFFA.

These transports are most vain. Retire *Elfrida*.
 Forbear the sight of *Anglia's* king. Remember,
 Obedience prompt in this, thy father deems
 Test of thy duty.

ELFRIDA.

Sooner from their orbs
 Tear forth these eyes, with all their bleeding cords.
 Can

Can misers yield their treasures? can the matron
Give to the ruffian's sword her only child,
Price of her travail, nursing of her hopes?
Here let me sink, and lose all sense and feeling
Of what I was, what am, and what may be.

OFFA.

Virgins, attend your mistress hence. No more
Elfrida; on thy life, wake not my wrath.

ELFRIDA

Oh! cruel father. Prince, we must become
Dead to each other; so my father dooms,
No more to meet, speak, love or ev'n to think,
That thus we lov'd, and thus we bade adieu.
Yet surely we shall meet; there is a place
For wretched souls from vile existence freed.
And oft the spirit which shall wing it's flight
Before the kindred mind, shall seek it's mate,
And whisper it away, and imp it's plumes,
To reach the blest abode.

ETHELBERT.

The fire hath past,
That fed my passion, as the light'ning brief.
And now I melt in softness feminine;
And feeble as a chidden babe, could seek
The mean relief of tears. A tedious sleep
Hangs on each sense, and weighs down all my pow'rs.
Must I then send thee from me? go in peace;
And heav'n's eternal blessings on thy head.

(*Exeunt severally Ethelbert and his attendants, and
Elfrida with her virgins; the priests and choristers
retire; manent Offa and Sigebert.*)

S C E N E II.

OFFA.

The die is cast.—What have I done? O *Sigebert*,
This act is thine. Thy counsels have compell'd me,
Ev'n

Ev'n to the brink and edge, where yawns below
A dreadful precipice. Here let me stand
Collected, summon all my wand'ring thoughts,
And fathom (if I can) with stedfast eye
The gulf before me.

SIGEBERT.

Can the mighty *Offa*,
The child of war, the minion of renown,
When glory calls him with her awful voice,
Refuse to hear? when pow'r imperial woos
With lofty charms, avert his loathing eyes?
When countless treasures only wait his grasp,
Close and withdraw his hand? oh diff'rent far,
Were *Offa's* thoughts, when with victorious arm
Northumbria's crest he struck, and from his sway
A province tore; or when, the *Kentish* bands
Quell'd and confounded, wide his banners wav'd
In conquer'd *Aldrick's* plains. Far diff'rent then,
When haughty *Kenwolf* rival of his might
Essay'd in arms what *Mercia* could, and sunk.

OFFA.

The quick and fiery pow'r of intellect,
With sudden change, now fluctuates here, now there,
Like northern lights along the starry cope
That shooting tremulous forebode the storm—
The storm indeed: alternate passions rage
Tempestuous through my soul; as 'twere a rush
They bend the rooted purpose. Rugged virtue
Hardy and firm, the growth of many years,
Shakes at the blast, and on the ground will strew
Her verdant honours.

SIGEBERT.

To preserve them rather
Refreshing dews shall come, and fost'ring gales;
The tears of pleasure, and the glad acclaims
Of *Mercia's* people, for their peace secur'd
To late posterity, shall on your laurels

D

Descend,

Descend, and softly breathe, and bid them rise
 With bolder growth, and hide their heads in heav'n.
 But pardon me, my lord, this wav'ring mood
 Unworthy all of thee, with wonder fills
 Thy faithful servant. *Offa's* mighty thoughts
 Were wont disclaim the weakness feminine
 Of doubt and sudden change, and like his sword
 Keen, bright, unbending, forceful, to their mark
 With prompt decision flew.

OFFA.

And well they might.
 For plain and obvious hitherto the path
 Before me stretch'd; and in the same abode
 Fame, int'rest, virtue dwelt. But now disjoin'd
 Their dwellings wide, and intricate the way,
 Befet with thorns and dark with mist and cloud,
 That leads to each.—Retire, good *Sigebert*,
 Behold our queen.—Somewhat of import high
 To us, or to the state dwells on her mind,
 Which to disclose she has our private ear
 This day solicited. In some short space
 Let valiant *Ella* wait upon our leisure.

(Exit *Sigebert*.)

S C E N E III.

Offa and Bertha.

OFFA.

Bertha come near,—nay why is this? your looks
 Are blank with ghastly fear; your trembling limbs
 Scarce bear you, with a slow reluctant pace.
 Of late I mark, with bitterness of soul,
 That care or sickness from your florid cheek
 Hath chac'd the bloom of health, and lively chear.

BERTHA.

Indeed 'tis true, my mind with secret care
 Hath been o'er-labour'd; and this feeble frame
 Hath

Hath suffer'd with its inmate. Many a night
 These lids have been estrang'd from balmy sleep;
 Or if perchance with watching overpower'd
 In slumbers brief I sunk, terrific dreams
 Have render'd rest more wearisome than toil.

OFFA.

Oftimes have you profess'd to tell me tidings
 Of import strange; but, ever, as you seem'd
 Address'd to speak, and I attentive stood,
 Your pale lip quiver'd, on your falt'ring tongue
 Th' imperfect accents died; and as I urg'd you
 To speak with confidence, in faint low sounds
 You murmur'd forth—the hour is not yet come.
 Ev'n now you start—and the sharp glance of horror
 Contracts your eyes, as tho' within their orbits
 They would retire from day, and lose their functions.

BERTHA. (*aside.*)

The pow'rs of ill possess my soul. The demons
 Of falsehood forge and fashion *Bertha's* organs
 To sounds pernicious.—Know my gracious lord—
 —I cannot speak. Some saving pow'r may yet
 Redeem me from myself.

OFFA.

Still do you tremble?
 The changing hues alternate on your cheek.

BERTHA. (*aside.*)

'Tis done. 'Tis past. He may not live for me,
 And shall not for another—for *Elfrida*.—
 Remorse, thou vain intruder, down.—No more.—
 Now thou art dead.—The door is clos'd for ever
 On pity, as on hope.

OFFA.

Will you not speak?
 Why do you trifle thus with my impatience?
 Oh speak!—How wild her looks! Some dreadful thing
 Sure, labours in her breast, that with a front

D 2

Thus

Thus strange and hideous in the prologue threatens.
—By ev'ry blessed saint, and minister
Of light, I charge thee, speak.

BERTHA.

—Well, I have steel'd
My heart with courage ; to reveal a story,
Which somewhat criminal I hold myself
So long from thee concealing ; yet my mind
Scarce yields to credit such a tale, related
Of him, whose outward form and royal birth
Promise exalted hopes, and princely virtues.
But night by night, in monitory dreams,
Thine image faint and bleeding at my side
Is ever present.

OFFA.

Heav'ns can *Ethelbert*—
—Yet wherefore should I doubt ? when he from *Offa*
No thought of peril harbours.—He, as false
And fabulous would hold th' intelligence
Of what works in this bosom.—Oh proceed.

BERTHA.

Some few nights since, two of the virgins nearest
By duty to my person, in the shade,
After a scorching day, enjoy'd the freshness
Of welcome eve.—'Twas where the grove of beech
Bounds the wide orchard ground, that white with
blossom
Impregnates now the breeze.

OFFA.

I know the place ;
If I remember, there, my falcon lost,
And long thro' *Mercia* fought in vain young, *Edbald*
Recover'd on the topmost bough.

BERTHA.

My virgins
An arbour sought ; and deep in earnest converse
Distinct

Distinct (for other sound than whisp'ring leaves
 And intermitted strain of Nightingale
 Was none) conceal'd from them two men were heard;
 But by the voice familiar to their ears
 They knew old *Ardulf* and the king of *Anglia*.—
 Much *Ethelbert* complain'd of love delay'd,
 And tax'd thee with injustice. Hoary *Ardulf*,
 In age impetuous with the fire of youth,
 Urg'd him, by violence to snatch the prize,
 Which fair entreaties hitherto had fail'd
 To win.—“Occasion prompts; old *Offa*'s arm
 Hath lost its nerve and pith.”

OFFA.

Old *Offa* said he?

And that this arm had lost its nerve and pith?
 Oh they shall feel—

BERTHA.

Nay, good my lord be patient.
Mercia (said *Ardulf*) views, with fond delight,
 The rising promise of thy gallant youth;—
 —(For *Offa*'s sons, their helpless infancy
 Bars them from hope or prospect of a crown;)
 —And were *Elfrida* thine, and *Mercia*'s king
 At rest within the tomb, to thee, his throne
 Were of ascent most easy.

OFFA.

What reply'd,

To these suggestions *Ethelbert*?

BERTHA.

As when

A trav'ller from an hill, with sudden view,
 Before him spread in prospect fair, beholds
 A city, with its glitt'ring spires and tow'rs,
 And urges on his course, with double speed;
 Such eagerness the youthful king display'd,
 To reach the tempting goal, which in perspective
 Before him lay; sure pledge of *Anglia*'s greatness.

Your

Your death was then determin'd, and old *Ardulf*,
 Contriver of the mischief, charg'd himself
 With its completion. Here, the fable night,
 Fast closing round my virgins, warn'd them home.

OFFA.

Enough was heard ; and by the heav'nly pow'rs,
 Whose sure protection in th' embattled field
 Was ne'er withheld from *Offa*, on the heads
 Of *Ethelbert* and *Ardulf*, shall their guilt
 Be tenfold visited. No more remorse,
 No feeble wav'ring now. O *Sigebert*,
 I yield me to thy counsels whole. What *Ella*.

BERTHA.

Think on the smiling pledges of our love ;
 They grasp thy knees, they stretch their little arms,
 They cry to thee for safety. Think on *Bertha* ;
 Widow'd and sad, the victim of her grief,
 And fierce *Elfrida*'s rage ; for well I know,
 She views me with such hate, as still pursues,
 From envious offspring of a former bed,
 The father's second choice.—Be prompt and firm.

[Exit *Bertha*.]

S C E N E IV.

Offa, Sigebert and Ella.

OFFA.

Brave *Ella* from my chosen bands select
 Twice ten battalions. Haste to *Anglia*'s bounds,
 (Her present state of careless ease supine
 Precludes resistance.) Overspread her plains ;
 'Till *Domnoe*'s* tow'rs beside the roaring deep
 Receive your host. There camp'd await my coming.
 —Wonder not but obey.—Yet more I would—
 But why does shame thus mantle on my cheek ?

* The antient capital of East Anglia now overflowed by the sea.

—My

— My tongue is palsy'd.—Learn from *Sigebert*
Thy further charge.

[Exit *Offa*.

S C E N E V.

Sigebert and Ella.

ELLA.

A change so violent
And sudden, from the feast and nuptial song
To warlike preparation, and the shout
Of martial fury!

SIGEBERT.

Muse not, valiant *Ella*,
Nor stand with folded arms in silence wrapt.
The king hath wisely doom'd. The hour is come,
That adds East *Anglia* with her sea-beat plains
To *Mercia*'s realm. On every side secure,
Bounded by mighty rivers or the sea,
Compleat and whole, a fortress in herself,
Our land shall scorn invaders. To maintain
This glorious prize indisputably ours,
An act of prompt and necessary daring
Requires thy faithful sword; which, if thy breast
With love and duty to thy royal master,
Or patriot virtue glows, thou wilt not now
Withhold.

ELLA.

When was the day, that *Ella*'s spear,
If glory call'd, or duty to his king,
Slept cold, or unperforming in his hand?

SIGEBERT.

Young *Ethelbert* must fall.—Nay start not back.
Thy country's weal demands it.—Open force
Were vain.—To yon dark shade at early dawn
And oft at closing eve, doth he resort.
Thither to cheer his lonely hours, if fame

Err

Err not, the bright *Elfrida* too repairs.
 The path from hence is dark and intricate ;
 The spreading trees, in close embrace o'erheard,
 Unite their tops ; and from their rugged arms,
 Impervious to the fight, in fragrant wreaths
 The tufted woodbines hang. The place is apt—
 The king's command is positive.—More speech
 Were needless, when intelligence with duty
 Combines, as in thy soul.

[Exit *Sigebert*.

S C E N E VI.

ELLA. (*alone*)

Oh wretched *Ella* !

Why wert thou singled out for shame ? What act
 In thy long life of warfare branded thee,
 By cruelty or baseness, for the task
 Of an assassin ? Shall this trusty sword,
 My lov'd companion for twice twenty years
 In toil and danger, which was never brandish'd,
 Save when in open fight I met my foe,
 And face to face, be stain'd with guiltless blood ?
 A monarch's blood—young—gentle—wife and brave ?
 —*Offa* may kill ; but never shall debase
 Old *Ella* with the name of murderer.

S C E N E VII.

Ardulf and Ella.

ARDULF.

A stir unusual through the court of *Mercia*
 Resounds ; her warriors muster, as for battle.
 Some furbush up their arms, some poise their spears,
 Some trap their fiery steeds. Where'er I turn,
 I meet such hurried and amazed looks,
 As tho' the trumpet from the beacon sounded,
 And

And warning fires on ev'ry summit glar'd,
To mark the foes approach. How fares brave *Ella*?
Thou canst explain this myst'ry.—What portend
These warlike preparations?—Thou art sad.—
Why thus avert thy face? Methinks a tear
Glitters in that stern eye, the dread of foes.

ELLA. [*afide.*]

—Never before was *Ella*'s bosom torn
With such conflicting passions.—Duty first
To *Mercia*'s king, through many a year of toil
Ne'er disobey'd; then mercy and compassion;
Next honour's sacred voice, which still supreme
Hath sway'd my soul; and last religion's law;—
All adverse to that duty.—For this time
Offa commands in vain.—True I am sad.—
I may not speak the cause; but trust my tongue
'Tis worth a soldier's sorrow.—For the love
I bear the young and gallant *Ethelbert*,
Let him fly hence.—I may not more reveal
But mark my warning voice which sounds not lightly.
[Exit *Ella*.]

S C E N E VIII.

Ethelbert and Ardulf.

ARDULF.

My royal lord, I tremble at your stay,
Each moment that you linger, by a hair
The sword terrific hangs. Nor you alone
It menaces; but your devoted realm
Must feel those horrors, which the wild ambition
Of *Mercia*'s king diffuses thro' our isle;—
The smoke of cities burn'd, and harvests wasted,
The shrieks of violated maids, the cry
Of widow'd matrons, and their orphan babes.

ETHELBERT.

I can believe whatever base or vile
Thy tongue can utter, or thy thoughts suggest

Of

Of *Mercia's* king.—He's ta'en me in the toils.—
 Unveil'd I now can read the guilty purpose
 Of his dissembled love and specious wiles ;
 And did not fair *Elfrida's* angel form
 Cling round this heart, and melt my soul; the sword
 Should speak my gratitude. Ev'n to the beard,
 Would I reproach his perfidy, and write it
 In characters most plain and legible,
 On his imperious brow.

ARDULF.

Oh think, my lord,
 Not from the restless aims of wild ambition
 Thy danger only, but from female rage
 Of charms despis'd resentful. Pride, and scorn,
 And jealousy combining all, will goad
 To madness *Bertha's* soul, and raise a flame
 Thy blood alone can quench.

ETHELBERT.

Unhappy woman !—
 Just are thy fears from *Bertha*. Well I know
 What pangs, what hells her ardent soul endures ;
 While fierce and manly passions, with their war,
 O'erwhelm and harass the weak female form,
 Where shall the spirit stay, which thus hath dar'd,
 What woman boldest can?

ARDULF.

The time, my lord,
 Requires a vigorous and prompt decision.
 Ev'n now the storm may burst ; confirm your soul,
 To wrestle with its fury. Wer't not good
 To fly this court, where snares surround your path,
 And on your native plains the standard raise.

ETHELBERT.

That *Ardulf* be thy care—With fiery speed
 Repair to *Domnoe* ; summon all my pow'rs ;
 And from the swains, whose toil with waving corn
 The

The bank of *Humber* cloaths, and from the train
 Whose finewy arms subdue the wave, and reap,
 'Midst dews of midnight and the howling storm,
 Their harvest from the deep, select the prime.
 Soon will I join your force, whom th' only hope
 To bear *Elfrida* partner of my flight
 Detains in *Mercia*.

ARDULF.

Here, I rooted stand
 Until I conquer. Thou must fly with *Ardulf*.
 I will not supplicate thee, but command;
 (For sure my years, my love, and services
 May claim authority.) Thou must away.—
 Nay, look not stern. I will entreat thee then.
 If thou hast pity for these hoary hairs,
 Think on thy danger. 'Tis not from surmise,
 Or anxious love, but grounded certainty
 I warn thee thus; thy treach'rous host this night
 Some fatal blow designs.

ETHELBERT.

My worthy *Ardulf*,
 Fear not; thou know'st that led by gallant *Oswy*
 A brave and chosen squadron tends my steps,
 Sufficient to protect from force by day
 Or treachery by night. Heav'n combat with thee,
 And sharpen thy good falchion. Loose thine hold,
 Wake not my wrath for by th' immortal pow'rs
 I will not hence to night.

ARDULF.

Then sharp enough
 My falchion is, to pierce a loyal heart,
 And spare these aged eyes the cruel scene
 To morrow's sun may show.

ETHELBERT.

On thy allegiance
 Forbear; and if thine heart with love or pity
 Beats

Beats for thine *Ethelbert*, (as sure it does,)
 Delay not thy departure.

ARDULF.

O my lord,
I go ; but never with such listless tread,
And heart so heavy, did old *Ardulf* seek
The tented plain. I wont to feel more blith
When trumpets sounded to the charge, than youth
Apparell'd for the dance, when minstrels smite
Th' enliv'ning harp. Farewell, my much lov'd lord ;
And O perhaps for ever !

ETHELBERT.

Nay, good *Ardulf*,
Wound not my soul with mournful auguries.
All will be well. Ere crimson in the west
The third revolving sun shall close his course ;
Elfrida's radiant form and seraph smile
Shall grace the camp of happy *Ethelbert*.

[Exeunt.

End of the third Act.

A C T IV.

S C E N E I.

An Apartment in Offa's Palace.

ELFRIDA

FORGIVE me, Nature, and ye hallow'd Pow'rs
That watch o'er filial duty, pardon me,
If in rebellion to my father's will
I yield to love's command.—'Tis near the hour.—
I must reflect ; for with persuasive accents
That tongue to which my doating heart accords

In

In perfect unison, will urge me soon.—
 To what?—I gasp and tremble, and my brain
 Is dizzy at the thought.—O father, father,
 Lov'd awful name, must thou resound no more,
 In matin orizon, or chant at eve,
 From poor *Elfrida's* tongue?—O *Ethelbert*,
 My lord, my husband, so this heart must deem,
 These lips must call thee;—can I then forego—

S C E N E II.

Enter Ethelbert.

ETHELBERT.

What gentle voice, in sweetly plaintive tones
 Invokes the name of *Ethelbert*?

ELFRIDA.

In sooth,

My thoughts as well as tongue were busy'd whole
 With *Ethelbert*.

ETHELBERT.

For that, may gracious heav'n
 Show'r down its blessings on thee. Be the omen
 Propitious to my hopes. Alas you sigh,
 Your face averted hides a gushing tear.
 Why are you silent?

ELFRIDA.

How can I behold,
 How speak to thee? when my relentless fire,
 With unprovok'd and cruel outrage, marrs
 The hope he nurtur'd. And when I reflect,
 —There is the mortal stab, what further ill
 He yet may meditate, with grief and shame
 O'erwhelm'd, I dread thine eyes.—And then, each word
 Exchang'd with thee incurs a father's curse,
 Sternly against our intercourse denounc'd.

ETHELBERT.

ÆTHELBERT.

The moments press, my love, your tyrant father
Holds me a captive here, who came his guest.
His snares around me spread, and hour by hour
Nearer he draws them. Should I now delay,
Around my head they close. In *Mercia's* court
This night if I remain, thine *Æthelbert*
Sees not tomorrow's fun. Now is the time,
To show thy love sincere, as thou hast vow'd.

ELFRIDA.

Sincere!—O *Æthelbert*, thou little know'st :
Would I might sleep away my span of life,
And only wake in heav'n to peace and thee.

ÆTHELBERT.

This hour eventful with my doom is fraught ;
On it my life, and dearer far than life,
My love depends.

ELFRIDA.

Oh whither shall I fly ?

To that thy speech would draw me,—to thy camp ?
There, stern in arms th' embattled squadrons breathe
Revenge against my Sire. Soon will ye meet
Amidst th' oppos'd files, your fatal swords
Aim'd at each others crest ; while I spectators
Of the sad tragedy, must weep and bleed
Whoe'er prevails.

ÆTHELBERT.

Wilt thou not share my flight ?

ELFRIDA.

No—put a ponyard in *Elfrida's* hand,
To pierce her father's bosom !—Share thy flight !
And join thy camp array'd in warlike pomp
To triumph o'er my parent ! Tho' I love thee
More than the light of heav'n, and rest thy fight,
Within a convent's gloom a widow'd mourner
Will pass my wretched days in tears and cries.

ÆTHELBERT

ETHELBERT.

Why will you torture whom you love? Why seek
Despair and grief? When hope and smiling days
Hang on this hour, and croud for thine acceptance.

ELFRIDA.

Reflect O prince, what dow'r shall sad *Elfrida*
Bring to thine arms, a father's wounding curse,
That curse, which never weak or unavailing
From lips parental falls. Oh me unhappy!
Return, ye days of childhood innocence,
Smiling return. Then my lov'd father's praise
In words spontaneous, to the sounding chords
Attemper'd flow'd, and caught the echoes round,
And bade them learn the tale of hardihood,
And teach the list'ning swains their monarch's prowess.
And oft the village maiden, that with song
Deceives the toilsome hours, would cease the strain
Of love disastrous or enchantment drear,
To tell how *Offa* won the well-fought field.

ETHELBERT.

Can'st thou unmov'd behold my tears, my danger?
Be thou obey'd. Receive the sacrifice
Of this devoted life.

ELFRIDA.

What means my love?

Can dangers threaten the life of *Ethelbert*
Nor touch *Elfrida*?

ETHELBERT.

Yes, let *Offa* come.

I wait his cruelty; for she who sways
The destiny of *Ethelbert* decrees it.
Soon let him plunge the sword, by black ambition
Urg'd home, and pierce this unoffending breast,
(Unless a faithful love and fond desires
In *Mercia's* realm are fins,) for she who prizes
The treach'rous wiles of a remorseless father

More

More than a lover's truth, and weighs the curse
By guilt and frenzy utter'd, 'gainst the life
Of him who breathes for her alone, decrees it.

S C E N E III.

Enter to them Ebba and Justus.

EBBA.

Health to my lord! and would to heav'n, the
tidings
That *Ebba* bears might better grace his tongue.

ETHELBERT.

How say'st thou *Ebba*? As thou pass'd from *Anglia*,
Met'st thou not *Ardulf*? On his valiant arm,
In dangers often prov'd, my soul relies
For refuge from the storm, which well I know
Prepar'd to fall.

EBBA.

It has already fall'n.

I met not *Ardulf*; haply, now a captive,
Not for himself, but for his lord he mourns.
Resistless as a torrent o'er our plains
The *Mercian* armies spread. Some hasty levies
To check their fury strove, but broken soon
And wide dispers'd through *Anglia*, their dismay
Encrease the gen'ral panic.

JUSTUS,

True, the paths
That hence towards *Anglia* lead are all beset
With *Offa*'s scatter'd bands, who have in charge
No less than the captivity or death
Of royal *Ethelbert*; but faithful *Ardulf*
Hath escap'd their ambush. Favour'd by disguise
He sought my hermitage, and bade me haste
To proffer an asylum, where conceal'd
You may remain, while through the land his care
Collects a pow'r, which with th' invader soon

Shall

Shall cope in open field. Meantime, 'twere rash
And vain, t' expose your person.

ELFRIDA.

King of *Anglia*,
The blush of shame for *Offa's* cruel wrong
Glow on my cheek, and greatly should I fear,
Knew I not well thy just and noble nature,
Lest thou shouldst hate me, for my father's crimes ;
Yet, what I can,—Alas ! poor expiation
Of guilt so mighty. Let the Daughter's love
Thy suff'rings from the Sire atone.

ETHELBERT.

Is this
Atonement only ? This poor expiation
Of suff'rings from thy Sire ? Propitious hour,
Thou hast assur'd the blessing which outweighs
Long years of bondage with the fetter'd slave,
Or exile from the face of day in dungeons
Where light hath never pierc'd.

ELFRIDA.

While yet I hop'd
That *Offa* might relent, nor peril fear'd
To thee ; my filial love, with fond delay,
Excuse oppos'd ; but now, with alter'd mind,
Thy danger seen, I urge thy flight prepar'd ;
The partner of whatever good or ill
Remains for thee in store.—Thy realm laid waste—
An ambush for thy life !—lend him your wings
Angels of light, that bear th' Almighty's mandate
Through heav'n, and earth, and sea.—Haste, haste,
my love,
Thy will alone is mine. I come—I fly—

JUSTUS.

The moments press my lord ; the sun declines
Behind yon hills ; and, through the waving trees,
Disarm'd of half his fire, the crimson orb
Shoots a departing lustre, and illumes,

E

As

As with a thousand lamps, the glitt'ring casements
 Of hall and armoury.—Th' impending night
 Must well be husbanded; her friendly veil
 Alone can promise safety. Faithful *Ebba*
 Will guide you to my hermitage. I feel
 A spirit in this bosom urge me on
 To seek the king of *Mercia*. With a tongue,
 By human greatness or the frowns of man
 Unaw'd, will I reproach him. Heav'n perhaps
 May make my voice an humble instrument
 To call him home to piety and peace.

[Exit *Justus*.

S C E N E IV.

ELFRIDA.

Alwina only shall partake my flight.
 She has been ever faithful. O farewell
 Ye peaceful dear abodes of early prime:
 Ye bounded all my wishes once. I thought,
 Bless'd in my childish sports and harmless thoughts,
 And a fond parent's smile, that heav'n itself
 Had nothing more to give. Alas how chang'd!
 My happiness no more within myself
 I find. It hangs on thee, O *Ethelbert*,
 My wish no more within my father's walls
 Is bounded now. It flies abroad with thee,
 Uncertain what it would. — And on the future,
 A die of dreadful import trembling waits.

ETHELBERT.

Two hundred gallant spearmen tried in arms
 Shall guard us in our flight. Their fiery steeds,
 On *Africk's* sands or rich *Iberian* plains,
 By swarthy *Moors* were bred. With nostrils wide
 They snuff the gale; and sweep along the plain,
 Keen as the northern blast.

EBBA.

EBBA.

Ere morrow's dawn,
We gain the hermitage. I know it well.
A river with its ouzy waters round
Impales an islet, and approach denies,
Save by a narrow causeway known to few,
The hunter of the wild, or those who, led
By pious motives, with devotion's foot,
The rev'rend place explore. From eyes profane
A clump of oaks, coeval with the soil,
An humble mansion hide, and round inspire
A gloom religious, suited to the life
Of him who bides within; for there devote,
To heav'n, or men whose thoughts on heav'n are
bent,
Long time hath *Iustus* dwelt; and from the soil,
With his own hands, obtain'd such simple food
As nature for an aged frame requires;
Preserv'd by temperance and tranquil thoughts
From languor and decay.

ETHELBERT.

Behold the queen.
Let us retire. And *Ebba*, thou, when darkness
Involves the face of things, collect my train
And wait in silence, at the postern gate
Behind the sacristy. With circuit wide
Coasting the palace walls, we thence may gain,
By secret paths an unfrequented ford.
Then, through the woods that cloth the river's
side
We shape our course, and gain the hermitage.
(*Exeunt.*)

S C E N E V.

BERTHA.

As they go out Bertha enters at the opposite part of the Stage; she looks earnestly after them.

—Oh wretch what hast thou done?—What web of fate

Hast thou prepar'd?—Ha!—there the lovers pass'd—

See—how she hangs upon him!—May perdition!—

—Ev'n on the brink, and precipice they dream

The main o'erhanging.—Soft the verdant turf,

And gay the wild-flow'r flaunting o'er the verge;

With treach'rous toil th' undermining wave

Affiduous beats below, with sudden crash

The soil unstable mixes with the deep.—

—Their love is innocent; but what is thine?

O foul; most foul!—Shall I then fly to *Offa*?

Unsay the falsehoods of my guilty tongue,

And die in peace? And shall I then confess

Such unexampled guilt? That, shame forbids.—

And shall they triumph o'er th' untimely grave

Of miserable *Bertha*? Shall I join

Their hands and fall a sacrifice, to grace

The nuptial rites?—If I must fall, and sure

'Tis so decreed, their fall shall sweeten mine.—

Whene'er we doubt and hesitate on ill,

The tempting fiend still sets before our eyes,

And places in our reach apt instruments,

That court our hand and make perdition sure.

For lo, this *Sigebert*.

SCENE

S C E N E VI.

*Bertha and Sigebert.**She continues to speak.*

The king of *Anglia*
 Was here ev'n now, and, with him, *Offa's* daughter,
 Regardless of her father's curse denounc'd
 On converse with his foe.

SIGEBERT.

Much danger hence
 To *Mercia's* king results ; for though, by nature,
 The princess to her Sire is dutiful,
 Yet what the wiles of *Ethelbert* may work,
 Moulding her to his wishes, well and justly
 May raise suspicion.

BERTHA.

Well indeed and justly.—
 Precarious is the life of *Mercia's* king,
 While *Ethelbert* survives. I have employ'd
 My utmost pow'r, entreaties, arguments,
 Tears and reproaches, but in vain. His soul
 Uncertain veers, irresolution strange
 And to his nature foreign.

SIGEBERT.

Offa comes.

Slow and reluctant is he to compleat
 What prudence dictates, and alone can give
 Stability to greatness. Yet my voice
 Hath rous'd a spirit of sublime ambition
 And godlike thirst of rule. Mine be the care
 To guard his heart, and stifle in the birth
 Compunctious visitings.

[BERTHA,

BERTHA.

No 'twere a deed
 To pull down curses—do not—yet, to see
 Their wishes crown'd, each in the other blest!—
 —I cannot bear it.—*Sigebert*, thy zeal
 For *Offa*'s life deserves—destruction seize
 Both thee, and me, and all the world—my brain
 Is stung—and now it flames and bursts in chaos.
 (Exit.

S C E N E VII.

*Offa and Sigebert.**The former seems wrapt in thought.*SIGEBERT. (*aside.*)

What can the fury of her speech portend?
 What wild unwonted rage o'erwhelms her reason!
 —But mutable, as shifting clouds, and void
 Of form as they, is woman's vagrant mind.
 And vain the labour were to fathom it
 With reason's plummet. Now, an higher care
 Demands my thoughts; for see the king approach.

OFFA.

Could I recall times past—O *Offa*, *Offa*,
 The last two hours!—How are thy laurels stain'd,
 With perfidy and murder!—Murderer—
 My soul revolts against that sound.—A murderer!
 Yet why?—'Tis justice—*Ethelbert* contrives
 Against my life.—So runs the specious tale.
 But then what proof?—And shall a mere surmise,
 An hearsay from a woman's tongue, which oft
 Deals forth, as certainties, the vain illusions
 Bred in the speaker's mind, and fictions forg'd
 Or truth with falsehood colour'd and deprav'd.—
 O *Sigebert*. [Seeing *Sigebert*.]

SIGEBERT.

SIGEBERT.

What would my royal lord ?

OFFA.

What mandate hast thou giv'n to warlike *Ella* ?—
And yet I know too well. Thou need'st not speak
And I should blush to hear.

SIGEBERT.

My gracious lord,
Such mandate as the mighty work in hand
Requires was giv'n ; and, lest his diligence
Should fail, like services were giv'n in charge
To some of truth approv'd ; and if their zeal—

OFFA.

I know what thou wouldst say ; but heav'n forefend
Their zeal were all so prompt. We will recall
The cruel mandate.

SIGEBERT.

First reflect my lord,
Ere this your troops, with rapid march possess
The plains of *Anglia*. Is young *Ethelbert*
A spirit that will tamely yield a kingdom
In long succession heir'd ? or bear the wrongs
Which thou hast offer'd ?—Goaded by revenge
To more than common daring, he will prove
A foe most formidable.

OFFA.

'Tis too true.

Heav'n's what a web of cruelty and guilt,
The first injustice weaves !

SIGEBERT.

This very hour,
Elfrida joins his flight. My faithful spies
O'erheard their am'rous parley. With what force,
He bears her hence ; what refuge hath prepar'd,
Where safely she may wait, while he, in arms,
Pursues her father's life.

OFFA

OFFA.

It is enough.
 This hour he dies. My disobedient child
 In living death, within a cloister's walls,
 And penitential works shall meditate
 A father's curse fulfill'd. Thou, *Sigebert*,
 This night's great business govern. Let my troops
 Possess each avenue that from the palace
 Towards *Anglia* lead, that none unquestion'd pass.
 The rest thou know'st; and I may trust thy zeal.

(Exit *Sigebert*.)

S C E N E VIII.

Offa and Justus.

(Offa continues to speak.)

But *Justus* comes, religion on his brow,
 And gentle wisdom beaming from his eye.—
 —Thy looks are clouded; tell me, holy man,
 What deed of outrage, cruelty, or fraud
 Hath vex'd thy righteous soul, That *Offa's* hand
 May reach th' offender, and th' offended chear
 With retribution ample.

JUSTUS.

Ask thyself,
 O king!—Thy sin is great.—Think not my tongue
 Can gloze with flattery. Ill it would become
 The man, whose days are consecrate to heav'n,
 To fear the pow'rs of earth. What can thy wrath,
 But speed an old man's journey to the place
 Where long his heart and hopes have dwelt before him.

OFFA.

Oh rev'rend *Justus*, thy reproofing tongue
 Hath ever licence; for I know that zeal
 In virtue's cause, not bitterness of heart,
 Inspires thy words. The pow'r to whom thy vows
 And orisons are paid, in mercy, sends thee
 To call the wanderers home.—Thy friendly wounds,
 Like

Like those proceeding from the leech's hand,
Give health to souls diseas'd.

JUSTUS.

Hear then, O king,
And tremble. Heav'n begins this very hour,
To visit thine offences.—For the queen—
I will not veil or palliate the horrors
These eyes have view'd, but rather urge them home,
To strike thine heart.

OFFA.

Saidst thou our queen? That blow
Would fall, indeed, most heavy. For what horrors
Wouldst thou prepare me? Speak, and yet I tremble,
And fain would shun the tale I needs must learn.

JUSTUS.

A dreadful monument of wrath divine
Your queen now presses to the fatal bourne,
Where sinners meet their doom.

OFFA.

What?—how?—oh fly,
Oh save and guard her. All that *Mercia* holds
Of dear and precious shall be sacrific'd—
Oh let me haste.

JUSTUS.

No, spare thy heart that pang;
Thy guilt is great; yet, would the sight of *Bertha*
So rend thy heart-strings that the chastisement
Were ev'n too cruel.

OFFA.

I fly to prove the worst.
The voice, the looks, the soothing cares of love
Assuage the fiercest pangs.

JUSTUS.

All aid is vain.
She cannot know thy love, or feel thy cares.
Reason hath left her seat. This very hour,
Conscious

Conscious of cruel wrong, by forg'd suggestion,
 And falshoods vile, to royal *Ethelbert*,
 With which, it seems, your ear she had abus'd,
 And wrought you to contrive his death, the thought
 Became too grievous for her burthen'd soul.
 To her distracted sense the bleeding form
 Of *Anglia's* king still present, goaded her
 With scorpion sting so keen, that in the rage
 And whirlwind of despair she swallow'd poison.
 Oh gracious heav'n! She's here, with strength renew'd,
 From deadly languor.—Now prepare thyself
 For horrors, which the tongues of man must fail
 To paint: and only guilt, like hers, can know.

S C E N E IX.

Bertha distracted; *Offa*, *Justus*, attendants.

BERTHA.

I've drank the cup of passion. Like the bane
 Of subtlest venom it dries up my blood,
 And courses nimbly through the empty veins.
 It flashes on my brain, consumes my heart,
 And hunts from seat to seat the failing sense.
 I know thee well (*to Offa*) thou art a murderer.
 Thy hands are red. The blood of *Ethelbert*
 Is on them.

OFFA.

Now, indeed, I feel my crime,
 In full deformity. This woman's pangs
 Begin my punishment. Peace *Bertha*, speak,
 Look up—She knows me not.

JUSTUS.

Oh, such a scene
 Avert from christian souls, ye pow'rs of grace.

BERTHA.

Ha!—what art thou? Some messenger from heav'n,
 Fraught with glad tidings? Such thy hoary hairs,
 Thine awful looks and rev'rend garb bespeak.

The

The hand of vengeance presses on my head.—
 Oh save me, save me. Tell me, if thou canst,
 Will shrift and penance wash away my stain?
 Son of religion, tell me, should I fly
 And grasp the altar, will th' avenging arm
 Snatch me from thence? O hide me in the cloisters,
 Where meek-eyed sisters chant the matin song,
 With unpolluted lips. When *Ethelbert*
 Shall come to seek me, let a snow veil
 Conceal my lineaments; and to my bosom
 The sacred cross I'll strain; and on my fingers
 The rosary shall hang to cheat his eye.—
 I burn, I burn—O lay me where the bank
 O'erhangs the stream, where gushing waters sound,
 And waving poplars imitate the voice
 Of timid lovers whisp'ring in the dusk;
 There, the cool rushing of the western gale
 Shall fan my raging soul. My lips shall drink
 The dew-drops as they fall to quench their fire.

OFFA, to the attendants.

Oh bear her hence; and sooth with tend'rest care
 Her wand'ring mind. As idle sounds receive,
 Wild and unfounded, what her frenzy utters.

BERTHA.

Oh king of *Anglia* stay. There, there, in flames
 He pass'd, riding the meteors of the north.
 Come, come; give me your wings ye winds;—I rise,
 And now, I mingle with the clouds. Burst, burst,
 And whelm me in a deluge. Wash away
 All sense, all thought, all memory of past.
 Hark, hark;—He calls again.—I follow thee.
 Yet soft, I may not. My disastrous love
 Kills where it follows. I destroy'd thee *Ethelbert*.
 Off, off, vile trappings of unseemly dust!—
 —The fiends are here—They drag me to my doom,
 The sulphur flames, the king of terror calls,
 From his infernal throne in thunder calls.—
 I come—I fly—Hell! hell! I'm wholly thine.

She is borne off the stage by her female attendants.

SCENE

S C E N E X.

Enter Sigebert.

SIGEBERT.

My lord, the king of *Anglia* and your daughter,
 Eluding our best diligence, are fled ;
 But doubt not, that this night from *Ethelbert*,
 So well I have provided, takes alike
 The pow'r and will to trouble your repose.

OFFA.

Hence from my presence, hence thou haggard
 mischief.
 And may diseases, loathed as thy form,
 And as thine actions foul, consume the remnant
 Of thy pernicious life. This work is thine.

SIGEBERT.

Are these the fruits of all my labour'd schemes ?
 Have I for this, with watchful nights, consum'd
 This feeble frame, and worn the day in musing,
 Of food and ease unmindful ? Be the fool
 Accurst, who treads the labyrinth of courts ;
 And doubly curst th' ambitious slave, who sells
 His peace and virtue for a statesman's name.

OFFA.

I've sinn'd beyond redemption. Never more
 Shall *Offa's* soul know rest, if *Ethelbert*—
 That thought were madness.—Fly, recall our troops.
 —Prepare my fleetest steed. Ourself will fly,
 To seek that injur'd youth. This arm shall guard him.
Elfrida shall be his. This very night,
 With nuptial benediction, will I join
 Their plighted hands. I know his noble nature
 Retains not anger. He shall be my son,
 Dear as young *Ethelred*. In sight of heav'n,
 I swear a solemn league of amity,
 Between our kingdoms. Never shall my sword
 Be drawn in wars unjust. Ambition's plume

Shall

Shall dazzle me no more ; but works of peace
And mercy shall obtain th' unfading palm,
Whose wreath outshines the laurel stain'd in blood.

End of the fourth Act.

A C T V.
S C E N E I.

A gloomy forest with a cave by night, thunder and lightning ; enter Ethelbert, Elfrida, Alwina, Ebba, and attendants.

ETHELBERT.

Alas ! you faint *Elfrida*, let us seek
Rest for your weary limbs. There is a cave,
That seems, by nature, form'd for hapless love
A friendly harbour. Thither let us tend.
The gleaming fires, that run along the ground,
Will guide our steps.

EBBA.

Forgive thy servant's zeal ;
Due west from hence, the hermit's dwelling lies
Not many leagues ; and, could we reach that place,
We were in safety. Compass'd as we are
With *Offa's* squadrons, on the storm and darkness
Depend our hopes of flight. The morning's dawn
Will soon o'ertake us, for the star that reigns
At midnight in the zenith, ere the tempest
Began to rage, stood o'er our heads direct.

ETHELBERT.

Ebba, I thank thy love ; but fear and toil
So press *Elfrida*, that her strength would fail,
Should we proceed.

ALWINA.

Alas, my gracious lord,
For pity seek yon cave : the night is fearful.

Along

Along our horses backs, in unctuous streams
The fiery vapours ran, blaz'd on their heads,
Or kindled thro' their manes—Mark, mark, that peal
Of volley'd thunder !—Heav'n in mercy spare us.

ETHELBERT.

All nature's bonds are loose. The elements,
Absolv'd from their allegiance to her laws,
Usurp each other's place, and wildly wage
Intestine war ; or, more portentous, meet,
And blend in league ill-sorted and discordant.
Now lightning fills the air, now, mix'd with rain,
The shooting meteors fall, an horrid show'r
Of fire and water scarce distinguishable.
Where'er we turn, the failing earth recedes.
All is a watry waste. The howling wind
Plows up the liquid plain, and whirls it round,
In stormy fleet.

ELFRIDA.

My dearest *Ethelbert*,
Excuse a woman's weakness, that my heart,
Though thou art near me, sinks beneath the terrors
Of this most dreadful night. I would not fear.—
My soul is manly, but my woman's frame,
Feeble and frail, spite of my best resolves,
Depresses it, and I could melt in tears.

ETHELBERT.

My love, what have you suffer'd !—and for me—
As through the woods we pass'd, the tangled boughs
Thy garments rent, and bruis'd thy tender limbs,
And caught thy beauteous tresses. From thy locks
The drifted rain distils. Thy lover's hands
Shall press the moisture forth, and o'er his heart
The flowing gold expand. Soon, shall the warmth
Of this fond bosom dry it. Let my train
Collect the wither'd leaves, and branches fere
Scatter'd around this cave, and bid them flame
To comfort her chill'd limbs.

ELFRIDA.

ELFRIDA.

See, here are seats
 Dispos'd by nature's hand. The shelving rock,
 Commodious bench, projects, with downy moss,
 Violet, and scented thyme, and tufted grass
 O'er grown; and mantling o'er the rugged walls,
 The creeping ivy spreads her tapestry,
 Of bright, and glossy green. After the toils
 Of night this humble cave a palace seems,
 With thee, my *Ethelbert*, whose gentle smile
 Can ev'ry state endear, and ev'ry scene.

ETHELBERT.

What sufferings hath heroic love endur'd,
 My heart bleeds for them. Thou wert ever nurst
 In pleasure's lap, and fondly lov'd, and cherish'd,
 And never felt rude blast or driving rain,
 Or knew but soft delights and golden ease,
 Such as a palace yields.—To bear all this!
 Which well might foil the strength and fortitude
 Of hardy soldiers. Sure, the life of *Ethelbert*,
 Should it exceed the common space allow'd
 To man, and all be spent in tender cares,
 And fond observances, would prove too short
 To show my gratitude.

ELFRIDA.

All words and acts
 Are infinitely weak, and fail to show
 What thine *Elfrida* feels. The more I strive
 To place my heart before thee, that thine eyes
 May read its thoughts, the more expression fails.
 Sure I was born in some ill-omen'd hour,
 For thy destruction. 'Twas this fatal form
 That lur'd thy steps to *Mercia*. 'Twas this form
 That arm'd my father's hand to injure thee.
 This form laid *Anglia* waste. This fatal form
 Exposes thee to the relentless rage
 And perils of this night.

ETHELBERT.

ETHELBERT.

My dearest, best,
 Ev'n toils and sufferings may become delightful ;
 That draw forth gentle offices of kindness,
 From those we love.

EB BA.

My lord, this boding heart
 Tells me we are pursued ; at intervals,
 When the fell whirlwinds intermit their howl,
 And thunders cease to roar, methinks I hear
 The sound of horse ; and once, with shrilly tone,
 A bugle sounded.

ETHELBERT.

Haply, through the gloom,
 Some forester belated seeks his way,
 Entangled and alone.—Yet, lest the foe
 Unguarded find us, let our scouts advance.
 Thou, *Ebba*, to the western path, that points
 Towards *Justus*' dwelling ; *Osbert* to the north ;
Morcar and *Siward* watch, with strict observance,
 The south and east.

(Exeunt *Ebba*, &c.)

ELFRIDA.

The lightnings cease to flash,
 A tender gleam of gray imperfect light
 Struggles for birth and streaks the leaden east,
 Forerunner of the morning. May the dawn,
 On wings of gold and purple, peace and joy
 Waft to my *Ethelbert*.

Ebba returns.

ETHELBERT.

What tidings *Ebba* ?

EBBA.

Our scout, advanc'd, can hear the voice of men
 Approaching through the shade ; and once the gleam
 Of flashing light, repell'd from burnish'd arms,
 Shot fearful on his eyes.

ELFRIDA.

ELFRIDA.

Oh most undone.

My lord, my *Ethelbert*, where shall we fly?

My father comes. Oh save me from his rage.

He tears, he tears thee from me. Let us grow together—

Thus, thus. No more to part.

ETHELBERT. [*to his train.*]

Prepare, to give

Our enemies such welcome, as a foe

Should meet from valiant men. Forbear my love.

Oh cling not thus around me. On my arm

Our future hopes depend. This very now,

This precious moment labours with our doom.

Well us'd, it gives to all our future lives

Security and love.—Must I then fly

From thine embraces? Must I break the clasps

Of thine encircling arms!

ELFRIDA.

Yes, go my warrior.

And strength and victory sit on thy helm.

Yet, in the fight, for poor *Elfrida's* sake,

Be careful of thy life; and shouldst thou meet

Amidst the hostile bands my cruel father,

Oh think on me, think on this faithful breast,

And spare his rev'rend head. I know the thought

Will stay the sword uplifted for his fate.

Must you then leave me?

ETHELBERT.

Better seek the danger,

Than tamely wait its coming. Valiant *Ebba*,

Remain thou here; an honourable charge,

My lov'd *Elfrida*, to thy care I give;

And leaving thee I march with confidence;

F

For

For well I know, no harm will reach he rbreast,
But through thine own. Lead on to victory.

S C E N E II.

Elfrida, Alwina, Ebba.

ELFRIDA.

Say, gentle friends, do you not hope my lord
Will vanquish these assailants? Why, I know not,
But sure my heart beats high, with lively chear,
And presages of good. I did not think
I could have borne to see my *Ethelbert*
Go forth to battle; but I know that heav'n,
If ever it rewarded, here on earth,
The good with favour, will protect his life,
Palsy the hands, and blunt the sword, and spear,
That seek his gentle breast.

ALWINA.

Yes, dearest princefs,
Heav'n will protect the virtuous *Ethelbert*,
From hostile rage. His life is due to man
A pattern of perfection. He shall live
To hold a mirror of connubial love,
And faith unstain'd, to ages yet unborn.

ELFRIDA.

My poor *Alwina*, thine advent'rous love
Hath all thy hopes resign'd, to follow one,
Whose gratitude can ill requite thy cares.
But fortune yet may smile; and happy days
In *Anglia* wait us. Mean while, let thy kindness
Recorded live, in fond remembrance here.

EBBA.

EBBA.

Doubt not my lord will conquer ; for his train
Of worth approv'd and hardihood, to quell
Tenfold their number of the *Mercian* bands,
Excited by a monarch's voice and arm,
Belov'd like *Ethelbert*, will deeds atchieve
Beyond the strength of man.—Speak, warlike form.—

S C E N E III.

Enter to them a Messenger.

EBBA continues.

Advance not, on thy peril, ere thy tongue
Unfolds what errand bids thee through the gloom,
With vent'rous footsteps dare the hideous wild,
And this more hideous storm. Though worn and sore
With toil thou seem'st, a wild and eager joy
Peers through thine eyes.—What art thou ?

MESSENGER.

A true subject
To royal *Ethelbert*, I come from *Ardulf*.—
All night with weary steps I've journey'd. Oft,
Encount'ring with the *Mercian* force, I scap'd,
Through favour of the darkness, and trac'd back
My steps with painful circuit. Deep morass
Oftimes my feet entangled ; oft the gulph
Of some still-wand'ring stream, with sudden plunge,
O'erwhelm'd, receiv'd me. Oft I scal'd with pain
The steep impending crags. But all my toils
Are fully recompens'd. I now shall see
My king, and chear his soul with joyful tidings.

F 2

EBBA.

EBBA.

Our lord is gone to battle ; but this princess
Takes a dear int'rest in whate'er befalls
The king of *Anglia*.

ELFRIDA.

Here, repose thyself.
I see thee spent with labour. If thou bring'st
Ought good or happy, speak it ; for my soul
Requires the healing balm of gladsome news.
But hark, a trumpet sounds.

EBBA.

It is my lord's ;
Our band returns.

ELFRIDA.

Oh God, oh God, protect
My dearest *Ethelbert* ! He comes, he comes.—
I tremble, but not with terror. Yes, these eyes
Again shall gaze on him, these eager arms
Clasp him again, and strain him to my heart.
I will go meet him ; lead me, lead me, *Ebba*.
Support my steps,—*Alwina*, to thy care,
That stranger I commend ; an hour of leisure
May serve his tidings. Hark, again, the trumpet.

[Exeunt *Elfrida*, *Ebba*.]

S C E N E IV.

Alwina and Messenger.

MESSENGER.

How blest is *Anglia*'s monarch, in a dame
So fair and exquisite. Say, gentle maid,
What subjects zealous for their prince's weal
Would gladly learn ; her name and origin.

ALWINA.

ALWINA.

Most freely, stranger, she is call'd *Elfrida*,
 To *Mercia's* warlike king she owes her birth.
 But fairer than her charms, although she shines,
 A paragon of beauty, brighter far
 Than royal lineage is her virtuous fame.
 Thou, in return, disclose what welcome tidings,
 With speed unwonted, urg'd thy painful steps
 From *Anglia* hither.

MESSENGER.

Could I fly, the tidings
 Deserv'd a falcon's wing. Know, faithful *Ardulf*,
 Collecting a small band of vet'ran troops,
 Rally'd the fugitive and poor remains
 Of *Mercia's* victory; and, with forc'd march,
 Surpriz'd the invaders in their camp supine,
 Lull'd in the wantonness of strength and scorning
 A routed foe. The conflict held not long.
 Some fled disarm'd; some in the neighb'ring stream
 For safety plung'd, and found a watry death;
 Some, with their arms at random caught, and armour
 Unfitted and unbrac'd, a feeble fight
 Essay'd at distance; but, full soon, the sword
 Of valiant *Ardulf*, thund'ring on their crests,
 A gen'ral rout compell'd.

ALWINA.

Lift, lift, methinks
 I hear the shouts of battle; mix'd, they rise
 With yelling whirlwinds. Now, the clang of arms
 Comes pealing on mine ear.

MESSENGER.

Thou art deceiv'd.
 'Tis but the wind among the giant limbs
 Of these huge oaks; they tols their knotty boughs,
 And

And imitate the sound of clashing swords,
Or shield to shield oppos'd.—My lord, my king.

S C E N E V.

*Enter to them Ethelbert supported by Ebba with
Elfrida.*

ETHELBERT.

Oh 'twas a glorious night. Well have I flesh'd
My sword. This turn,—O fortune, thou wert just,
And crown'd the righteous cause.

ELFRIDA.

Still, still you bleed,
I feel the warm tide gushing. Let me tear
These robes, these tresses, to bind up your wound.

ETHELBERT.

I am not hurt, my love, I must be well
And happy near thee. Long the *Mercian* chief,
Held vict'ry doubtful. 'Twas a lucky blow,
That clove his casque. On ev'ry side, his train,
Confounded, fled, as if th' eternal arm
Was bar'd to smite them. Then, my ravag'd plains
And subjects murder'd crouded on my mind,
And bath'd my sword in vengeance. As he fled,
One coward turn'd, and sent an arrow back.

MESSENGER.

May heav'n, with vengeance, mark the caitiff
wretch.

ETHELBERT.

Yet sure I thank him. To that shaft I owe
Sensations sweeter than I knew before.
Oh when my dear *Elfrida's* flow'r-soft hands,

Cold,

Cold, smooth, and white as lilies, touch'd my arm,
 To draw the bearded steel, methinks, my heart
 Leap'd bounding to the place, to meet her touch;
 But when the soft warm coral of her lips
 Was to the wound apply'd, from ev'ry part
 The hurried spirits crouded; soul and sense
 Were center'd there, and all my frame beside
 Was but a rigid monumental form.
 Oh perfect happiness!—Such full content
 Complete and absolute!—I could have died,—

ELFRIDA.

No, live and love, and make *Elfrida* blest,
 Who knows nor joy nor earthly good without thee.
 Her only name for happiness is *Ethelbert*.
 And, more to glad thee, see this gallant stranger,
 He brings thee welcome tidings.

MESSENGER.

I am come,
 To tell my lord he reigns again in *Anglia*.
Ardulf triumphant o'er the foe, by me,
 Greets thee, and bids thee haste, with best dispatch
 To join thy force to his, which ev'ry hour
 Swells with new levies.

ETHELBERT.

Now I am indeed
 A monarch. Twice, to brave and loyal *Ardulf*,
 Stand I indebted for a crown. *Elfrida*,
 Said I not hope and smiling days should yet
 Await us?

EBBA.

Arm, my lord, a pow'rful band
 Approaches; if mine eye deceives me not,
 Their chief is *Mercia's* king.

SCENE

S C E N E VI.

Enter to them Offa, with Justus and Attendants.

OFFA.

Ye gallant Saxons,
Prepare not for defence. No hostile purpose
Is mine. I come a messenger of peace.
O prince, (*to Ethelbert*) you see a royal suppliant here,
Who work'd thee cruel wrong; but happier thou,
The injur'd, than th' injurious; for the wound
Of guilt will prove intolerable, unless
Thy pardon heal. Lower to thee I bend,
Than *Offa* thought he ever should to man.
But next to virtue pure, 'tis nobleness
To mourn a fault, and seek, by reparation,
To cancel past offences.

ETHELBERT.

O my father,
For, by that dear and venerable name,
I now may call thee, bend not thus to me,
Whom best the posture suits, thy son, by duty
As by the ties of dear and fond alliance.
My pardon—rather say my gratitude.
Past seeming wrongs as benefits appear,
That swell and double thus the present joy.

OFFA.

My child, *Elfrida*, fear not now my curse,
For converse held with *Ethelbert*. Thy father,
By this embrace, absolves thee. Smiling days
And mutual love await you. I am come,
To join the plighted hands and faithful hearts,
I vainly strove to sever. I have wak'd
As from an horrid dream; and now I loath
My own ambition. On the precipice,

SCENE

My

My foot was timely stay'd. Unhappy *Bertha*
Rush'd furious on, and perish'd in th' abyss.

ETHELBERT.

What?—perish'd say'st thou? when? how?
righteous heav'n!

OFFA.

Yes; *Bertha* is no more.—But think not of her,
It were a tale too dreadful for thine ear;
Nor could I bear it; 'Twould, with grief renew'd,
Convulse my heart. Now, let us fix our eyes
On bright and smiling prospects. All my wish
Is to repair the past. With homeward steps,
Ev'n now, my troops from *Anglia* bend their march.
And whatsoever wrongs thy people felt,
In person or possession, from their inroad,
Be tenfold recompens'd.

ELFRIDA.

Yes, I do wake.—

My words by wonder, doubt, and fear suppress
At last find way. My father, O my father,
Best, dearest, kindest. On her knees, *Elfrida*
Blesses, and thanks thee; thanks with gushing tears—
But not of grief. O I have much endur'd!
But this, this goodness, over-pays it all.

OFFA.

Rise, daughter; king of *Anglia*, take her hand.
The heav'n's rain blessings on you. That your joys
May be proverbial. And succeeding times
When they would carry benediction high,
As human voice can utter, to their darlings
Shall say, "be happy, as the gentle prince
That wedded *Offa's* daughter." May your children
Cling round these knees, when failing age, from war,
And

And manly sports shall hold me prisoner,
Play with my silver beard, and, with their prattle,
Deceive the weary hours of life's decline.

ELFRIDA.

Ah me, for pity! wretched that I am!
Look up, my lord, oh he is sick to death.
Unusual chillness seizes him; his brow
Is cold and damp; his face is deadly pale.—
Oh let me chafe thy hands in mine; and bid
The genial warmth return. Come, sit thee down;
On thine *Elfrida's* faithful breast recline
Thy gentle head.—Help, help,—Oh heav'n, he faints.

ETHELBERT.

It is too late. The dart, that pierc'd my arm,
Was dipt in poison. Pangs, fierce burning pangs,
Throb eager at the wound, convulse my frame,
And shake my lab'ring heart.—I pant—I gasp—

ELFRIDA.

Oh sounds of horror.—Not the volley'd fire,
Darted from angry heav'n; not rocking earth,
Trembling, and heaving, with her inborn flame,
Would so confound me. But thou shalt not die,—
Or if thou must, yet, stay for thine *Elfrida*!
I feel the venom too.—My soul stands plum'd,
To share thy flight ennobled and compleat,
This hour shall crown our loves; for, at my heart
The busy poison works.

ETHELBERT.

Oh talk not thus.—

Now death has stings, indeed. Thy tears and cries,
Thy parting agonies, unman my heart.
Angels, that hover round us, sooth her grief,
Bring heav'nly balm and healing on your wings,
Shade her from fierce impatience and despair.

Ah

Ah little does she know the rending pangs,
 That throb and agonize in ev'ry nerve,—
 Insufferable torments !—How the streams
 Of molten lead devour my vitals up !—
 My blood is flaming sulphur.—My parch'd lips
 A glowing furnace ; and my fiery breath
 A blasting exhalation !—Oh death, death,
 Wilt thou not fold me in thine icy arms ?—

Aside.

OFFA.

My child, *Elfrida*, to thy heart speak comfort.

ELFRIDA.

Comfort—I know not, now, what comfort means.
 The day is close shut in, and now, for night,
 A dread and gloomy night bedew'd with gore.
 See here, see here.—Thou hast destroy'd a youth,
 Whose single worth the kings of earth outweighs.

OFFA.

'Tis just, O God, 'tis just I bear all this !
 All this, and more.—These are my fatal works.
 'Tis fit I should become the veriest wretch,
 That ever crawl'd and agoniz'd on earth,
 Stript of my grandeur by th' usurper's hand,
 Despis'd and abject ! Give me, O ye pow'rs,
 A strong enduring heart, and patience firm,
 To bear my lot of torments, which shall rise,
 If justice dwells above, o'er human woes,
 To reach a height stupendous as my crimes !—

ETHELBERT.

Be patient, king. Thy sorrow comes too late.
 Th' almighty doom is past. It was decreed,
 That *Ethelbert* should fall. But, for my sake,—
 'Tis all th' atonement thou can'st make my shade,
 Be kind to poor *Elfrida* ! At the past

'Twere

'Twere vain to murmur. Earthly things have lost
 Their influence o'er my soul. Here I am weak—
 And here alone. Fairer to me thou seem'st,
 As at this solemn hour I gaze my last,
 Than in the soft enchanted days of peace,
 When first I lov'd thee!—Feel my bursting heart;
 It throbs within my breast to blend with thine!
 —My pangs are fled, a sweet and blessed calm
 My being melts in gentle languishment.

ELFRIDA.

I am not thunder struck. I still can speak,
 And gaze abroad, and see my wretchedness.—
 My *Ethelbert*,—He's fled—He answers not.—
 Fled, like a vision,—but I am resign'd.—
 My love thou art at rest—O when shall death?

ETHELBERT.

That tuneful voice recall'd my parting soul.—
 —Farewell—but not for ever.—Gracious heav'n!
 Sure, we shall meet.—And yet I am—thou know'st—
 Heav'n, heav'n receive and bless.—This heart—
 farewell.

The grave's deep silence shall send forth a voice—
 (*Dies.*)

ELFRIDA,

*After gazing a long time on Ethelbert, as she stands
 over his body, with folded arms, sits down on the
 earth.*

Here will I fit, a monument of woe,
 Which men shall come to gaze upon with wonder.
 I will not share my proud ambitious grief,
 Ev'n with the noblest of the race. My sighs
 In distant solitary pomp shall heave;
 For never sorrow had so great a theme,
 So full, so fair, so high. Break, break, my heart,
 Sooner

Sooner than spare an atom of thy freight.
 Here is a pang that scorns the aid of words,
 And groans and cries, the common forms of grief.—
 Silence shall speak it best, these rigid nerves,
 Eyes fix'd, and limbs unmov'd, but chiefly death:—
 —Earth reels and staggers;—down a depth immense,
 I sink—I sink—commix'd in giddy whirls,
 How all things round me swim in formless mist!
 —Eyes gaze your last—crack eyestrings—and break
 heart.—

'Tis past—'tis done—receive me, *Ethelbert*!

(Dies.

JUSTUS.

Why is the barren tribute of a tear,
 All I can pay to love and innocence?
 Estrang'd from human life, and all its cares,
 In calm religion's port, this fight of woe
 To mortal sorrows drags me back again,
 Renews the warmth and bleeding sympathy,
 Of early life. Restrain thy tears, O king;
 They flow in vain.

OFFA.

And therefore 'tis they flow.
 I am a wretch, indeed, abandon'd most
 Of every guardian pow'r. Yet am I firm
 'Midst fiercest pangs. I wonder at myself,
 That reason keeps her hold, with eyes unmov'd,
 To view the mischiefs I have caus'd,—the wreck
 Of all most noble, amiable, and good
 In human-kind, by these accursed hands.—
 My sweet *Elfrida*, in the flow'r and prime
 Of bloomy youth. The gentle *Ethelbert*,
 The boast of *Britain's* isle!—What force withholds
 This rash unhappy hand? that, with a blow,
 It should not break the cords of misery,
 That strain me on the rack and bid me sleep!

JUSTUS.

JUSTUS.

Forbear, O monarch; such desponding words
 Disparage manhood; and renounce the duty
 Thy subjects challenge. 'Twere a bold rebellion
 Against thy Maker. Wouldst thou kill thy mind,
 With all her eagle brood of noble aims?
 Let works of mercy, piety, and peace
 Redeem thy guilt; and thou shalt be forgiv'n.

—*Exeunt omnes.*

F I N I S.

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